

HOLOHAUS-1



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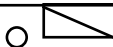


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SPECIAL THANKS

to Escher Mcdonell for snow

to nekosattva for the glittering shells

to rumour hell for the static on the leaves

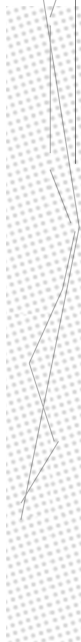
to Amara Reyes for the planetary

to baroquespiral to tell the vision

to tsumaran_chan for sake and world

to epou for the name

and countless others including the one who sees this





NEW ANIMALS

by: Escher McDonell

NEW ANIMALS

Name: Hudson Ashbrecht

Birthday: July 1, 2XXX

Occupation: Military contractor

Sex: M

Blood type: O

Likes: "Adventure. Yeah. I'd say I live for adventure."

Dislikes: "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Seen with: Amethyst and Power Security Corps



[from Personnel Control dossier 19072705. KH: Mars]

Not so much man as rubble shaped into a person and shoved into the north's military craw. Father was a preacher, found dead splayed on the kitchen table under mysterious circumstances. No wounds. Wasn't much time for forensics, then. Mother vanished in the marsh soon after. Life alone in rural New Brunswick left Ashbrecht adept at living on the land, skilled with firearms, and possessed by intense independence. Gained first combat experience after joining an

character profile

Acadian military contractor fighting Maine Threeper incursions, later joined voluntary border militia keeping American refugees out of the country. Stipend paid for his high school tuition.

Teachers commented on his thoughtful bent, which in adulthood manifests in outbursts of intellectual glossolalia that rupture his baseline drug-addled melancholy. In a different world he'd be starving on the sessional professor circuit teaching bourgeois sprogs about Kuhn. Instead he found drugs, and then an A&P recruitment office.

Ashbrecht's managers admire his inability to feel discomfort in any circumstance: whatever his threshold for disgust is, he hasn't reached it. It is our opinion he never will.

Ideal candidate for JCO work. Recommend offering employment at the first opportunity. Will continue monitoring.

Claims he's never dreamed.



NEW ANIMALS

Synopsis

after an ecological disaster destroys communication systems, the baffin war, as named in board meetings, commences with proxy wars between nations and corporate interests while new life emerges under the new sun, new mutations stalk the violent tundras.

the world continues on in a familiar way with school graduations and jobs, the new animals roam at the outskirts of the new cities with an unprecedented nature.

creatures altered by a grotesque nature, even the smallest of cruelties seem monstrous to the thousands of inhabitants.



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W0E101'
V010101
10W
COM2E0E
W0E1'
211
D0G0B
1B20W
G0B0W





cw: war, gore, death, guns, body horror, sex, drugs, disaster, apocalypse

"They all had a thousand good economic and political reasons why they couldn't stop. I'm not a politician or a businessman; how am I supposed to persuade them about these things. What are we supposed to do; quite likely the world will collapse and disappear under water; but at least that will happen for political and economic reasons we can all understand, at least it will happen with the help of science, technology and public opinion, with human ingenuity of all sorts! Not some cosmic catastrophe but just the same old reasons to do with the struggle for power and money and so on. There's nothing we can do about that."

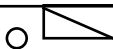
Karel Čapek, *War with the Newts* (1936)

His name was Hudson Ashbrecht. He wasn't yet a colonel though he would be. He hadn't yet traveled the world but in time he'd fight in corporate war zones on every conti-

NEW
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071BICE2
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NEW
ANIMALS

PROLOGUE: 1 BEARS WITH HUMAN FACES



nent. (Yes, Antarctica too.) His status just then was another lowly mercenary, the only power he held was his rifle. That was enough. And even then he beheld the north's sublime horizons as though they represented nothing but a palm-ful of dirt.

Tingles flew down Ashbrecht's spine, like when as a child he'd heard his father preach. Fire ravaged the tundra. Insects rushed from the blaze: mosquitos and midges, bees too far north but granted entry by the past decade's freak warmth. Birds fell on the easy meals and sang to one another. Smoke shredded on the wind.

Slaughter was general in the arctic. In board meetings it was called the Baffin War. Outside board rooms it was nameless. News didn't cover it. Its refugees were ignored. It was at its theoretical heart a proxy war between Germany and Cascadia, but the instigators weren't relevant any more. It had become something else, a mercenary war yes Inuit and Canadian nationalist bloodied themselves as well, but their number was swallowed by the mercs.

Recruiters bought lean and war-beaten once-child-soldiers from Sudan and Ukraine and the States. Private militias flew in, trained by evangelicals in China, insurgents from the half-century Middle-East war, crotchety South



Africans with the best gear on the market. From Madagascar and Malaysia and the Falklands, Nazis from Chile and wild American hired guns and geriatric Alberta Threepers and dogged cavalry from Pakistan — they were purchased and imported and sent to slaughter each other.

They lit the oil wells and torched stockpiled coal. In mountains they burrowed after each other with ears pressed to the stone wall for parallel tapping picks. They had bullets by the bucketload and dynamite. Cessna air fleets laden with improvised bombs and TNT circled overhead. Armies that long existed just to keep rust belt towns employed at last were carted north, where, after brief mobilizations, thawing sod swallowed them. Cobalt-tipped bunker-busters plunged into the ground and lit methane bubbles and reeking blazes chewed like frenzied moles through the earth. Now and then serene earth burst with a blazing belch miles from the bombs' violations.

Putrefying mastodons churned to the surface, woolly rhinoceroses. Sickness rose with them, fevers riding the thaw — a militia from Israel was extinguished by anthrax, a novel bubonic strain decimated a Quebecois regiment, a parasitic protozoan left ten Chechen contractors with molten faces, an incurable flesh-eating mould wiped out a Colom-



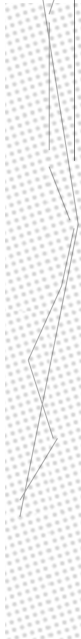
bian brigade. Worst was the idiopathic illness that turned bodies to runny sludge in hours — no doctor could find a cause. Mercenary companies established a cordon sanitaire around the district where it rose and waited for that open lazaretto to finish its work.

Drugs flowed north. Sex slaves. Contraband cigarettes. Hooch. Californian technocrats testing out new psychological weapons. Engineers. Observers working for corporate intelligence consultants. Submarines prowled the waters, deprecated things purchased from countries long splintered to nothing. They hunted each other and dodged the jellyfish blooms, and when that failed, jelly jammed the works and the subs became sarcophagi.

Parapets and trench networks mutilated the land. Drone fleets fell to arrows and artificial lightnings smote concrete forts as the latest weather machines had their field debuts.

Fields bouldered with gas-fatted corpses that popped, splattered. Boneskippers had drifted from Europe to feed on marrow runny and glistening over rough tundra pebbles. Greenland sharks feasted on corpse flotillas.

And above all that, the sky was green. Chemicals, the shift-





ing climate, algal blooms — precise reason fell fast to speculation: the upper sky was noxious and strange. Its fluorescent stain lasted through the sunsetless summer, hooping the Sun's outrageous eye in concentric steel rings.

It was a short war, only entering its ninth year when Ashbrect signed his first contract. Some months his unit fought for Europetrol and some months for Exxeon and some months for the Texas United Energy Concern.

Ashbrect: He tracked down and butchered warlord bands along the tree line (crawling north further each year). Deployed to Ellesmere he'd tracked enemy generals across moraines dusted with magenta flowers. He plumbed abandoned diamond mines that pitted the land to detonate enemy stockpiles, the whole time locked in a claustrophobic diving suit against the saturated CO₂. In military bars he danced as throat singers performed the rasping pop that had exploded here with the influx of soldiers and grown insanely popular back home. Within units it was normal to settle disputes with duels: hatchets or pistols. He'd done that within weeks. And some units had you sip human blood or eat people meats before they let you into the inner circle. He'd done that too, though he'd had to snort a fucktonne of gorefuck to stomach it the first time.



And you'd get strange looks if you weren't taking trophies. Whites who found the practice distasteful blamed black Africans, but it had started with white American mercs mailing skulls home to their loved ones. Bone earrings and tooth necklaces and stolen fillings and helicopters decorated in femurs. Striding through corrosive haze and carbon dioxide sinks where all other life was silenced, necklaces clattered with scrimshawed human bones.

He roved by infrared through bottomless nights with no mandate beyond killing whoever he found, a task he executed to perfection. War-smoke veiled the dancing aurooras. His unit was issued experimental dope and he was entranced by the swirl a lichen made as it grew by centuries on rough red stones, blissful despite the glacier rubble knuckling his belly, sheltering from overhead fire. He lost a finger, an ear. His face was wretchedly fucked up when buckshot imploded his cheek. The emaciated UN sent observers, who he guided to their vanishing. He waded through lakes that went no higher than his knees, blood-starched-fatigues nibbled by translucent minnows whose pink insides were visible through their backs.

Ashbrecht's fifth year at the front a solar flare set fire to half earth's telecommunications infrastructure. Wires

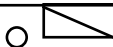




melted, hard drives blazed, server farms oozed for weeks and congealed to a heterogenous slag. That day the flare struck went by Sunny Sunday in the English world. While across the northern hemisphere businesses struggled to import new computers and governments tightened fists on their serfs to resolve the economic crisis, the war's golden age began. It had never been busier. Programmers and IT specialists and all the small economies who depended on them (until their jobs broiled) streamed to the Arctic. Companies and governments fired budgetary cannons at battlefields to jumpstart shattered manufacturing centers.

In this charnel mire the animals, having long teetered over oblivion, and despite chemical sores and esoteric cancers, thrived. Corpse-fertilized fields became grazing-grounds, muskox and caribou nosing between hipbones and tibias, crunching fingers. Lakes thrashed with arctic char fattened on bodies. Foxes scavenged and preyed on other scavengers. In the silence between the guns, amid trench and crater and grave, tundra life enjoyed a a defiled renaissance.

The polar bear had long scrabbled on extinction's slope and was close to falling, but the war's carrion-glutted seasons gave it purchase. The bear clawed its way back.



After a decade, they thrived again, ragged and rugged and rotting things. Polar bears by genetics and taxonomy but hard to recognize as such. By any comprehensive definition, something hardly a bear any more. Pelts the unhealthy yellow-gray of tobacco-stained teeth, shedding oily mite-colonized clots. Tumours decorated their faces and sores wept from their flanks and many were milk-eyed and blind, sniffing after meat. They moved in groups, ears cocked for gunfire that declared where carrion might be.

At first the mercs shot them but whatever esoteric gangrene thrived in the bears' bodies meant you could shoot one in the brain and most times it would snort, indifferent, as though it had been shot by nothing more than a hailstone. Bullets thumped into their bodies and they loped leisurely away, blood oozing thick as syrup from the wounds. About one in five times the bears took these attacks as provocations and tottering through outrageous bodily damage mauled whoever shot them and the poor bitch's whole unit.

The soldiers stopped trying to kill them after the war's eighth year. Except among new recruits, all knew it was bad to fire on bears. Gunning them down brought shit luck and bear-wrath. Feeding them, victory and good tro-



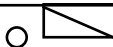


phies.

Surplus prisoners were staked to the ground for the bears. Mercs regarded these offerings with bent reverence. (The prisoners not offered to the bears were beaten for a while, then issued contracts by their captors.)

And the new polar bears gathered the offered meat as if it was birthed by the land, wagging limp-limbed torsos like over-boned placentas in their jaws.

She was born Emmet and was trying out Amelia, a name she'd adopt in time. She hadn't understood herself and welcomed the Baffin War's violent democracy. She had wanted to be a biologist but the biology she was invested in had imploded into something almost as niche as phenomenology—the only jobs available either in genomics or assisting those in genomics. She'd wanted to be a myrmecologist. She was transfixed by living things and their systems and how their ancestral histories welded them to rails they'd follow from zygote to the moment decay made their corpses synonymous with dirt. A millionaire t-shirt drop-shipper was shrieking at her over a headset about the kerning on his store's about us page when the line



dropped. The sun had smitten every drone in every fulfillment center in the northern hemisphere, every server, and every phone line. Her computer screen fizzled briefly and oily smoke coiled from gaps in its plastic shell. Her laptop sparked and she threw it in the sink, ran water over it where it continued to bubble.

She leaned back in her kitchen chair in her narrow room in a Montreal habitation block. The block opposite filled her window with many hundreds of identical kitchens where stunted succulents tilted towards the light. She'd heard about sun activity on the news and anticipated power outages, but she knew enough about the world to realize this power outage wouldn't end any time soon, and that she'd need to eat. A recruiter had spoken to her in the neighbourhood when she'd been smoking on the curb, about work up north. She'd also heard that ants had been discovered forming bizarre new life systems in the melting permafrost.

At the recruitment center they'd been ready for the sun the recruiter had a candle and typewriter, paper forms fanned on the desk.

Amelia learned to shoot, and fight with a hatchet. It was fun and she didn't understand why she'd thought she'd

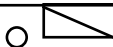




have compunctions around killing. Nobody cared about her junk or her body hair and they all called her Amelia without problems. She brought nothing but her gear and notebooks with her, between fights or even in them she illustrated the life she found. Ants had been introduced, queens riding the mercenaries Argentine ants had founded a new supercolony, parasitized by an undiscovered species of slaver ant. Trap-jaws were feasting on springtails that thrived among skeletons, and marauder ants had developed a remarkable toehold. She ordered more notebooks, and if they were full, pilfered paperwork from the company office and wrote her developing monograph on the backs of type-written memorandums and invoices.

She and Ashbrecht were assigned to the same unit. He smiled a lot and they got along over beers and campfires and sucked each other's dicks a couple times. He liked narcotics and had been there for a while and she knew staying by him meant living to finish her work. He regarded her as sharks might regard remoras. And like sharks and remoras the two were difficult to separate.

And they were deep in the post Sunny Sunday years



when directives were rare and what public sliver took interest in the conflict were preoccupied with reassembling their lives from the technological collapse that Amelia and Ashbrecht saw the comet arrive.

What records exist from that war are financial, and nobody, not even Amelia, recorded its passing. But to those bought souls that warred in the arctic the conflict was bisected into two eras: before and after the comet.

It was winter's core. The sun surrendered to unbroken night. They gnawed the cheap walrus pemmican their employers issued and moved south on the town. The wars' fronts, its rhythms and tides and eddies had consolidated on Naujaat. Though an objective strategist would have said it was worthless it was a way station, a minor military base, another puny Inuit community to be press-ganged into labour work it would soon be site to the most grueling battle of the Baffin War. That night for the two mercs it was another job and another opportunity for trophies.

Shivering auroras dragged their eyesight skyward, electric colours warped by the stained air, dancing as if performing for an interstellar messiah. It bowed huge and low, the comet, silhouetting Cessnas wandering beneath its lurid tails. Chalky snows dusted the ground and hissed with the



relentless desert winds, reflecting its hideous fire. All the tundra turned corrupted glowing green that twitched as though it was skin on vast gelatinous musculature. When he blinked, the scars from comet lights etched in his eyes and the scars on the arctic night became one.

By that light Amelia and Ashbrecht fell on a camp, by comet glow Ashbrecht shot three soldiers as his commander's battle mix throttled his ears. By soaring colours he dug up a sharp pebble from under the snow, a stone that hadn't moved since the year the first caucasian plague-men brought rats to Mauritius, and etched three notches on his gun. He was among the last in his unit to retreat to the plains and so saw the bears loping and saw what he thought were wounds on their faces — strange, nude, and pink — maybe burned by something — maybe all put their noses in the same chemical sink — but he didn't have time to make sure before his unit needed to move.

He fingered the notches on his rifle.

"What are those for?" Amelia said, pointing.

"Kills," he answered, and grinned. He pointed at her gun.

"You did it too."



She squinted at her rifle, confused. She was holding a pocket-knife. She'd blunted the tip adding four slashes to the butt.

They hadn't been the only ones to notch. Winter lurched to spring. With sunlight Naujaat became the Baffin War's vortex. The army base was pulverized and the town was abandoned, but mercs fought for the land because people were fighting for it and nobody had ordered them to stop. Markets had found their footing on the war. They were pulsing to the front's appetite, feeding it to feed themselves. As Naujaat's war accelerated, the comet appeared in stickers and badges, a skull with the comet's flowing green tails decorated gear and vehicles. Comet-chan proliferated in stickers on base computers, and pin-ups painted on vehicle snouts, split peace fingers pointing to tallies. A frenzy for counting had seized the belligerents. Guns and armor became cave walls for notches. Uniforms and hatches and gear. They used awls and improvised shanks to make their marks. When they starved they ate the dead. The land drank blood, grew swampy. Arctic wolves tottered through the mire so soaked in human ruin they looked like roving scabs.

And when Ashbrecht saw the creatures, he first assumed





were ordinary wounded bears. Something had denuded and warped their faces, but from a distance he couldn't tell what had happened or articulate the nature of the wound.

"What are you looking at?"

"Something funny about those bears."

Amelia squinted. "It looks like their snouts are missing."

But the pair couldn't stare much longer, they had to leave their foxholes. Artillery strikes were coming.

Radioactive materiel festered in the land around Naujaat. Temperatures climbed to the twenties by March and where the ground wasn't rocky it was swamps that stank with burbling methane.

Ashbrecht's unit was assigned to claim the cliffs. A single surface-to-air missile battery kept their employer's supply drops at bay. It was staffed by leathery fighters from Peru and Australia, who'd festooned their barricades with barbed wire, and festooned their barbed wire with guts.

And the birds were coming, migrating north. By millions, gulls and loons and geese and eiders and stray albatross and pelicans, kestrels and hawks and falcons that fell on

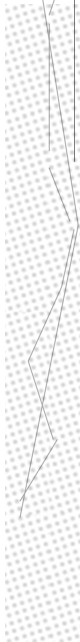


them. Air a squawking riot sharpened with razor wire sight blocked by an avian squall, flocks rising, golden-eyed, white-and-gray feathered, signaling to the sharpshooters whenever anyone attempted approach, until the mercs learned to use bird-clouds for camouflage.

And then the birds laid their eggs.

Rocks slick with shit and yolks, the birds became a third belligerent, dive bombing anyone too near their nests. With mortar falls carcasses trailed feathers. Ashbrecht and Amelia fought amid stone and feces, their skins and clothes shit-painted white and purple-brown, textured with fish scales and tiny bones. They added more cuts to their tallies. It was a long fight. The eggs hatched and downy larva screeched for their mother's mercury-tainted vomit and they were plucked away by hawks and trampled under mercenary boots.

The sun stilled at its height. Through a fluorescent green dome, it watched. It warmed the land to a freakish 42 degrees centigrade and the mercenaries thirsted and sweated. An algal bloom flourished in the sea. Birds died, fledglings hardly discarding their down before pollutants archived in their bodies stopped their hearts. Gulls shrieked mournful over the gunshots, guarding the inert chicks in their nests.





Many birds had gone blind and floundered. Loons turned to cannibalism. Cliffs roared with flies. Sharks who'd sniffed their way up from the deeps feasted on feathered bodies shredded by the surf.

Ashbrecht and Amelia were together at the spear-tip when they took the compound. Its mercs were ribby and exhausted and drugged, eyes scrutinizing astral depths of beige concrete and bullet-holes. Some had fallen to dementia after eating bloom-tainted gulls. The one still staffing the surface to air missile site was asleep, and gunshots hadn't been enough to wake him.

They had the prisoners draw lots to see who'd be given to the bears. As they'd tied the offering to the perimeter fences one man had muttered to Jesus and an Australian woman called Amelia a cunt. She nodded. It was normal for the offerings to act like that, forgivable. Their sweat sparked in the sun and stink thickened the air to spoiled aspic.

Ashbrecht relaxed on a couch for the first time since winter in the heat and looked out to the water—brown-red where algae thickened it to pudding—through a window spider-webbed with cracks made by stray flechettes. Amelia leaned on his shoulder. They slept.



He woke up to screaming and laughter and assumed at first they were one sound he'd just mixed up. Then it swelled. It was laughter. Maniacal. Off. He checked outside (Amelia slumping on the couch) and saw the offerings. They were cackling and crying. The perimeter fence beside them had been torn down. Something growled and snorted outside. Machine gun fire popped. Air sang. Flies thronged and the offerings' laughter frolicked with guffaws gulls hurled from their curdled throats. Gunshots fell silent.

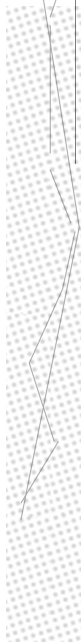
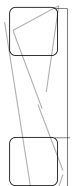
"Amelia!" he shouted, and she sprang from her rest and grabbed her gun and was with him.

Two mauled carcasses dotted the ground like crushed crabapples, red ribs bare and offal freed from its membrane.

He wasn't sure when he'd prepped his gun and armoured up. He rushed out into the arctic's stinking fever, thinking the heat was the same colour as the comet's tails.

The offerings laughed.

He and Amelia, covered in notches, painted in dried gull shit that made them look like they'd crawled up from the land under the dying colony. Together they'd shot a woman from Tunisia and four Nigerians and eight Saskatchewan





cavalry corps and their horses and four Russians and half a dozen Peruvians and three Texans and two guys from Montreal and two Colombians who'd cut their teeth in Iraq and four Iraqis and two Sikhs and four Mongolians and seven Ugandans

They'd crossed the world. War was what they knew

and two Australians and fourteen South Africans and a shocking sixteen Germans each who put up a real fight before they bit it. Ten French

and where their rays intersected, courses stopped.

fourteen Chinese, one Korean, an Italian prince, eighteen Dutch, ten Swedes, four Chechens, eight Texans, thirteen Cascadian technocrats

The barracks were appropriated school portables. He spotted with his rifle, sweeping, moving along, Amelia watching his back. A bear, haunches the unhealthy gray-yellow of tobacco-stained teeth, studied in the blood. Skin sagged from its ribs. Mottled sores leaked a clear resin that stained the fur around it amber. Its claws were huge and blunt. Its bones pressed against its pelt though its gut was bloated.



And it lifted its head to see them.

He thought it was the combat drugs.

It had to be the combat drugs.

The bear was bloody. Maybe it was confusion.

No. No.

It had his face.

His temples buzzed and he could see each molecular pixel moving in the air a between them. A mole stood out on the left cheek, a nevus vein spidering on the right nostril. Like his. The teeth were gappy and an eyebrow split and the heterochromia that affected a third of one blue iris matched his. And the little scars from when he had snake-bites before enlisting. And the precise acne down cheeks where his thin beard grew (that flowed into where the beard phased into the first wiry hairs of the polar bear's pelt).

It had to be the Sack-23 or the gorefuck or the snarl or the daisy rain or the snowdrops or the guts or the

Amelia said, "Why the fuck does it have your face?"





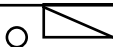
He shot. Blood spots in the cheek, shoulder, eye burst (his, its) and it didn't roar. It grumbled. It stood. It looked down at him, confused, with his own cratered face. A tower, monument in emaciated muscle and filthy hair. He fired again and wounds scalded its gangrenous flanks and again as it fell to its paws and charged. Hair-clots shaking. Claws scrabbling the gravel. He emptied the mag as it roared and swatted him.

He hit a wall. Amelia fired. Stopped. She, the bear, they were both out of sight. He couldn't see what happened out his left eye. Mouth filled with a taste like copper. Thought he'd die. The bear would grab him and shake his bones to breaking.

With each shallow breath and ragged heartbeat he expected the thing to clamp his neck in its tusks (teeth? his?) but it didn't.

He mustered enough strength to tilt his head.

Amelia shuddered against a portable wall, watching the bear. As it breathed blood bubbles like pulsing berries popped and fizzled where its sides leaked gore on the gravel. She'd shot it through the heart. Lucky.



They had to leave but he couldn't let it escape with his face. He had to have the face so even when the drugs wore off he could see.

And the offerings laughed. Tears flowed from their faces. Ribs cracked with guffaws. Their wrists bled where they pulled against their binds. He tore his hatchet from its holster with a velcro rip. With full body bent like a bow he brought the edge down on the bear's skull. With determined swings he cracked the bone and cut away the face from the top lips to the brow. Bear brains wetted gray gravel. The wind rose and brought rot with it. Flies were already settling the new hairy moon their offspring would strip-mine. He tossed away a mummified Swedish hand didn't bother with the wedding ring and hooked the bear face to his carabiner by puncturing the skin with his hatchet.

"Come on," he barked. Amelia didn't move, save for the trembling spreading from her hands. She rose unsteady, reloaded her carbine.

"What the fuck," she muttered. "What the fucking actual fuck."

She steadied herself at feral look Ashbrecht shot her from





the pits in his face, half-veiled by blood from the slashes on his temple. His pupils were huge. She felt she could have lowered a pail into them on kilometers of rope and never touched bottom. His incisor was cutting a lip til it bled.

They pressed on, following bear-grunts over the portables. Walking careful, sweeping, checking behind themselves.

Their unit had been opened like pomegranates deseeded by every method every innovative mother ever faced with the task had devised to deseed a pomegranate. Their rubies glistened, pith, peel, arils. Sweet molasses drizzled on tarmac.

Bears feasted. They looked up when the pair got close. Slav's face sagged on the end of a pasty bear's neck. Cheeseman from Sudbury's dirty blonde beard caught blood and walleyes regarded them. On bear bodies he saw Soda from Winnipeg, and Turtle whose English was shit, Crosshairs and Shitstain and Forrest and Charmander and Funk. Flesh dribbled from duplicated lips. They chewed with human teeth, unfit for raw meat, like cows working cud. He stood with his gun and his ax. Blood from the severed face hotly wetted his right pant leg. And one bear lifted its head, one eye dangling on a pink thread between



two teeth: Amelia's face.

The bears seemed to scrutinize the drooping face-flap he'd severed from one of their number. The one with Amelia's face sucked up the eye like a noodle, groaned, loped away. As the other bears followed he howled. He tried to fire but his gun was empty. Amelia's hands shook. She couldn't move.

"Why the fuck does it have my face?" she muttered. "Why the fuck—" And he reached for her gun and she sprang back as if bit by a snake, "No!" and pointed the carbine at him. "There's something here. I need to understand."

In silence they stood, tethered by gun sight. Rotting birds flopped out of the new bears' way.

He stood panting. Amelia lowered her gun.

The new bears were gone.

The hole he'd gnawed in his own lips was swollen. Howling meandered on the dead air from the offerings. He turned and finished each lunatic with a single whack from his ax. At its deepest the place just over the horizon where dusk had been absent for a while the sky was green like



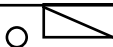


the first April leaves.

Gulls tore the bodies. Loons and geese joined soon after with their ill-equipped beaks. But they didn't touch the decapitated bear. It added its spoiled scent so like rotting dog hair to the other stench. Some far-off memory let Ashbrecht know the sea smelled like decay because it was full of life and he wasn't quite sure how that pertained, but the thought obsessed him for hours. His pantleg had stiffened. He found a black stone spotted with seafoam and rust-speck lichens and laid the face out to bake. The sun dried the skin from above and the stone dried the bone from below.

He sat in a shaded cup under a portable awning. And watched. He chewed protein bars and pemmican with sore, loose teeth and took fitful naps and watched his face desiccate and swatted flies away when they tried to land. The cycloptic sun watched him sober up.

First the incandescence wore off and deracinated his ability to subliminate his gag reflex and he spent hours throwing up mucus. The moondrops after, plump imps frolicking around him, hallucinations pawing his face and tugging his ears and burrowing into the lipid sheath between skin and muscle to lay eggs. Though it had soared to 45 degrees



centigrade, when the crimson pills faded he shivered as though he'd been fished from an ice-locked lake. His capability to manage horrors wavered. He screeched. Amelia brought him water and snacks from the canteen and urged him to come inside and sleep but he wouldn't. He peeked through fingers clamped to his face at the strange trophy and when he could bear to look at it, gnawed his own nails. Amelia rubbed his back and held him and tried to get him to eat. The birds ate what chicks survived and feasted on each other. Wings weak or plucked to nothing they tottered on webbed feet, chasing one another like leprous dinosaurs. Feathers and down roved in whirling clouds until the stale breeze brushed them out to sea. He stopped drinking. The water tasted like bitter piss. He became one of death's gray soldiers from an old Dutch masterpiece, skin shrink-wrapped to rib, joint, and vertebra. The bird colony was extinct. Bones threaded together with dry tendons. Flies had dispersed to find nests elsewhere and calm soared over the arctic plain. Amelia watched the ocean and waited for orders but the radio had been dead since the new bears attacked. The water was algae-smothered, dead sharks' bobbing mottled bellies the only break in the runny shit-brown surf.

And the new bear's face was still his face.





Though broken by a bullet-wound, it had his freckles. His scars and his moles. Had he looked in a mirror and had endless time he might have correlated each follicle on the mask to his own.

He was sober.

Sober, he roved through the outpost's supplies.

"Are you going to eat now?" said Amelia. She'd been saving rations for when he decided to rise.

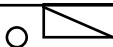
But Ashbrecht was silent. He punctured the leather-and-bone thing with a kitchen knife. With the same knife he chipped out space for his nose. With bootlaces he knotted it to his face.

He turned to her. Through eye-holes that were copies of his own, browned and taut and dry, he watched her.

"We have to kill them," he said.

"Who?"

"The fucking goddamned bears," he said. "Your face." He grabbed her chin. "We need to get your face back."



"We need to understand what's going on. Maybe it's GMO
shit "

He shook his head, outraged and quick in a way familiar
to her from when she'd told customers they wouldn't get
what they wanted. "No, no. Nothing like that. How could
they even do that? That was your face. It had your scars.
Exact scars, look." He pointed to the wizened face that sat
over his own, lifted it like a visor, put it down again. "See?
The same. It's the same. They copied our fucking faces."

"You need to chill. We don't know what's going on."

"The comet," he said. He heard himself a second later and
realized he'd shouted what he'd felt as a mutter. Amelia
was standing still. Haggard and lean. Thoughts roved be-
hind her eyes. "Don't you want your face back?" He said,
softly. She looked at him in confusion.

"No?" she said. "That's not my face. And I want to get out
of here."

He sighed. "Fine. Come on. I'll drop you off the next base."

But she didn't leave him. They passed bases where compa-
ny flags sagged in windless air and didn't part ways. Ash-

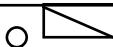




brecht was disconnected and Amelia disconnected with him. Wherever he went he asked in his potsherds of foreign language after the bears, Amelia with her knack for tongues clarified.

Rumour flew from all directions. Ursine massacres became common. Mercs would flee entrenched positions they'd held for months if they saw the new bears were coming. His second face human, fringed with new bear fur, was to all who saw it a fascinating artifact from a rare survivor. Soldiers asked about it and pressed food and good luck charms withered thumbs or stolen buttons or tiny holy books into his calloused palms. He discarded everything he couldn't eat, but Amelia saved so many mementos that when she jumped she jangled like a jester. Questions vanished after it became known they hunted the bears. Word spread when the pair was coming. They were given alms in hollow-tipped bullets and protein bars and bumfodder. Followed spool Ashbrecht called shitgriffins because their traits were as incongruous together as those of birds spliced with lions.

And soon found other survivors. Like Ashbrecht they'd reclaimed their faces and like him they wore them and like him they alone had walked away from their polar



manticores. Only one spoke English but conversation was redundant. They wore the story on their face and understanding animated them.

Amelia dragged behind them, watching their scabbed double-faces from the fire-edge for signs as to what phantom drove them. Why they didn't seek answers. Sapropel reek blew inland from the sea. At last the sun threatened to fall past the horizon. Strange stains blotted the sky — clouds perhaps, but too like gelatinous medusas that pulsed and quivered. Where they cruised any self-sustained comfort left her.

They chased new bears. They ambushed them and were ambushed and pursued them in running fights and wove through mountain passes. In the dark, in the daylight, through years. The new bears shared rot and ruin with the land, after all, and they knew it. But the new bears lacked mercenary ingenuity and the hunters, with bullets and hatchets and clubs, hunted. And killed them. And with each bear they added a tally to their masks, a cut in the leather, a scratch on a gun.

"I don't understand what this is about."

"We're getting our faces back."





“But I have my face already.”

If they didn't know whose face the new bear copied, they burned the head and if they knew they found them and gave the cured mask to its owner. Recipients always joined the hunters.

The war's fifteenth year ended.

It sank into arctic night, which never fell below -26 degrees centigrade that year, even with the windchill. The ursine legionnaires continued their hunt. The few who wouldn't aid them were pillaged. They robbed stores from coal mines and natural gas deposits. Bear claw necklaces swung from their necks, wore pelts for winter coats.

In universities some distant ecologists declared the polar bear's extinction, but Ashbrecht knew that polar bears had been extinct for a very long time. He didn't have a rank jotted in any document, but he was the Colonel now. His primacy determined by that band's silent democracy. He lead them to loot the trash-heaps where the new polar bears sheltered, landfills where they made their dens. And by the war's sixteenth year the human-faced new bears were fleeing north, to die when the ice floes melted and they become one with the gray slush on the acrid sea. For



the hunters this was blasphemous injustice. They pursued. High above the meridian, at a shore by a stretch of sea that at one time may have become ice but now was just slush reaching out to the horizon, the last new polar bear turned and met their predatory gazes. Ashbrecht half-expected an eye to dangle from between its teeth. It turn and began to bolt for the water but they were on it already.

“Amelia,” he shouted over the steaming corpse. “Amelia! Where’s Amelia? I’ve found her face. Amelia!”

He waited to hear back, the regiment gazed at him impassive, ready for the completion of the final ritual, taking back what the animal had taken from them.

“Amelia?”

Ashbrecht returned to regular contract work.

His services and the services of his ragged army were in demand, and with their reputation he commanded ludicrous fees. He still roved the tundra’s corpse. The war roared on. After a while he discovered he was interested in other wars than this.

He left. Started his own corporation. He had an office in



Toronto with a frosted glass door and he spent a lot of time typing and clicking, feeling numb, like his father had died only the previous week and not many years before. Despite the scars, or perhaps because of them, he cleaned up fine. An orthodontist fixed the gaps in his teeth, dentures replaced those scurvy took. He was known in the contracting business for leading from the front and took assignments far away, coming back wealthier, more experienced, with trophies from animals he'd killed between bouts of killing the nude, forked, standing ones. He was summoned to dinners at huge houses and chateaus in the countryside outside Ottawa. He shook ministers' hands and met generals who asked his opinions on serious matters and rival contractors who knew about his time in the tundra and avoided him. Champaign pearls bubbled silver in his cup. He dined on abalone and squab and crinkled geoduck sashimi and langoustines and finger lime and yartsa gunbu and uni and sea bream and wagyu beef and beluga caviar and Iberian jamon and saffron and aged modena balsamic and real wasabi from the Izu peninsula which was in a place called Shizuoka and la bonnotte potatoes and

She was a portly woman. Chuckles shook in some ditch north of her lungs. Keen eyes met his and she laughed at his jokes and he laughed at hers though he wasn't sure



who she was.

"Is it true, about the bears?" she asked.

He said it was.

"Really?"

Yes, he said, and if she stopped by his office he could show her samples. (His face. His true face. The one he)

"No need," she said. She pulled out a little silvery case and clicked it open. Passed him a card. "If you'd ever like a career change, just call my office."

She was the environment minister, it turned out. She had an opening under the subdepartment of Wildlife Management.

He called her office two days later.

He recalled his bear hunters a month after that.

The government was founding a new office: the Department of Animal Control.

Nature's dysfunction, it appeared, was no longer restricted to the arctic circle.





Essin was shocked that, after fifteen years being hammered roughly into shape by the education system, the hammering was done. The future loomed. They had never articulated the thought, but if pressed they might have said that since a young age they'd lived with the sense that the future was short and so there wasn't much sense thinking about it. Droughts were coming. Crops would fail. The earth would bake into oblivion and oligarchs would prance through the ruins headshotting refugees because they couldn't get their emotional shit together. Sunny Sunday, and the life it brought, hadn't done much to quash the impression.

Through high school the sense had gathered flattening weight. That June when they were due to graduate they spent a while on the library's computers watching the old interviews their mother did back when before Information Control was founded. In at least three interviews she described her job as "chronicling the apocalypse."

They spent long hours after wandering the neighbourhood trying to tire themselves out, fishing through memories. They thought perhaps it was impossible to do the kind of work she did and not have it filter somehow into your life, not pass it on to your kids like some epigenetic

PROLOGUE:2 GRADUATION



sadness. But the thoughts resisted form — epiphanies were shredded like jellying on rocky surf.

Graduation day was sunny, a freakish brightness that summoned all details from June trees and dandelions and their graduating classmates in formal clothes, gowns and hats, shiny fine black shoes. People clutched umbrellas brought for the forecasted rain, and yet not one cloud intruded on the blue. To Essin the intricacy that light bestowed on everything was something to take shelter from, details saline structures in a solution saturated enough to burn.

The school linoleum was shiny. It reflected their shoes. And its windows reflected the pale afternoon. Dicks and rumors and sophomoric dialogues about anarchy and weed in the bathroom stalls were only legible if you squinted at the roughness under the fresh paint. They sweated in the gymnasium as teachers organized the student body and then sweated in the auditorium as they sat and their names were called by rote and they briefly shook the limp hands of administrators who'd only spoken more than twice in the last four years to perverted children groomed to have political aspirations.

They were given a prop roll of blank paper tied with a





pale green ribbon. Their actual diploma waited in the gym. Awards were given. There was a new one, named after two kids who committed suicide late last year. Brief moment of remembering (most students had forgotten), applause for the student who'd won the award, and then Essin was back in the gym to return their gown.

The school had done everything to make sure it looked immaculate for the graduation ceremony except hire landscapers to trim the weeds. In Essin's first minute as an official high-school graduate, the only thing they noticed were the dandelions: in the school's ratty, litter-filled gardens, along the lines of the school foundation, spreading like prickly suns from each asphalt crack and crevice. They imagined them splitting through the walls and the roof, given time. Even in the parking lot, they sprang three triumphant feet from potholes.

Grown-ups filed out the front entrance. Essin put their diploma in one hand and stuck the other one in their pocket, picked a direction, and walked for a while, under big maples and cedars. They walked as fast as they could for a quarter hour in the shaded calm. They stood, stunned, and trembles crept over them. First in their hands and lips and then in their crotch and legs and it seemed as



though their eyes were whirling in their sockets and their head was full of bright far-flung points of light streaming like strange comets and something was bottoming out and something else had made them weightless and there were beings, things, anti-voices, booming from the space between the stars.

It wasn't just that they weren't going to uni, or that they didn't have plans for college. They felt a strange alrightness with their planlessness at a time when everybody seemed to have memorized a blueprint for living. It wasn't like they were bad at school or anything — they'd gotten subject awards in biology and philosophy. It just seemed like something someone else had made and they couldn't see how it connected to them. The whole ordeal of applying to a university, then going to a university and learning about a subject until it became abstract beyond reckoning. And anyway basic degrees and certifications weren't worth shit anymore. Nothing functional really made sense. Like — why plan vacations or write manuals or build tables or organize libraries or diddle with the tax returns of people who were too lazy to sit down and hash that shit out for themselves?

Why go anywhere?



Standing on the empty street, clutching their diploma in its cardboard tube and mortarboard and the little silvery medals from the subject awards, difference boomed over them. Like the sky's ceiling had suddenly risen and the whole neighbourhood was caught in a blooming bubble of rarified air.

It seemed as though the whole world was there, in that neighbourhood. Earth beyond its peripheries had been demolished, turned to thickets of tangled criss-crossed power lines, rooftops with weeds blooming out of them, windows filmed with pollen and dust thrown up by distant construction, ratty overgrown lawns, gardens obscene with over-ripe peonies. Beyond this place were farmer's fields, more suburbs, then the city, the hills that caged it in its valley.

But past that?

They turned, walked back.

Something noiseless and measureless was unfolding on the school lawn, merging into the rhythm of a special event. Groups gathered for pictures, kneeling, arms laid across each-other's shoulders. Essin was roped into a couple groups for pictures with people they'd spoken to a



couple times. They hadn't been one for friends and they weren't sure if that was by choice or ineptitude. Cicadas drilled the air above the chatter. Their eyes caught motion: white butterflies moved in a triad, somersaulting over each other in the air. Parents chatted with each other in little packs while students took selfies. Some dads were passing out cheap cigarillos and grape and cherry and vanilla tobacco sweetened the leaves and asphalt.

They threw their mortarboard up with everyone else. The next day they went to the dinner the prom committee had booked at the Museum of Natural history. They sawed through tough and overpriced chicken bedded on par-boiled rice. A girl at their table had smuggled in a mickey of vodka by duct-taping it to her inner thigh and passed it around under the tablecloth. Music played so loud that they had to shout. And then it was off to the buses, for everyone to sweat and drink in a cabin in the hills. Essin spent the whole time thinking about how tired they were, sat outside, watched the city lights while people fucked among the trees.

That was graduation. Essin went out with their resume two days later, and landed a job at a Starbucks.





Name: Yelena Nabokova

Birthday: October 22nd, 2000

Sex: Female

Occupation: part-time Pizza Hut Delivery Technician

Likes: the color amber, dried flowers, pseudo-spirituality, friendship with Christine, the smell of cheap tobacco, games with a lot of blood.

Dislikes: nonfiction, math class, fake tans + long nails, shirtless guys that rap on the street for money, people who complain.

Blood type: B

Seen with: "I hate wearing things that are too clingy. I've always had this strange half-nightmare waking up, where I feel the comforter and the blankets are too tough and I can't escape. I prefer things that are loose. You can hide in them; even though you're in plain sight, you feel unseen. I even like wearing my glasses even when I can see just fine. It feels like a convenient mask."



by: [nekosattva](#)

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~ hey there ~~ welcome to Elena's site <3~

17/f/wouldn't you like to know

7/3/2017:

i heard something today that brought me back. a stupid little russian song. someone told me it's a hot new trend, they put these songs behind pictures of girls shooting guns, drinking, etc. after so many years of hatred, they miss the old country more than me. they ask me all the time, "what's it like, oh my god. did you have to sniff glue? did your mom have to fuck strangers for money?" i almost slapped one of these sluts.

i don't remember much. i think we had it good. whenever i saw Michael, he'd give me a big stack of foreign money or something and tell me to study hard at school. he said he wished he'd been smart and studied hard like mama. i think every stupid guy with more success than sense daydreams about being some kind of writer. mama says i'm too hard on him,

new posts



but she talks to him like a dog that shat the carpet.
i remember nights in old cold cabins, and having to
put fire in an oven for hot water. i remember doing
stupid math homework by candlelight yuck

i remember the violence. i think it's always fasci-
nated me. i remember the glowing streaks of red.
those old tv's made everything look like glittering
gold, pulsating like an open wound. i remember the
soldiers marching in the streets. here; no-one real-
ly thinks about war, no-one even remembers how it
started. but back there, and then, when the planes
were falling and there were bombs planted every-
where... my mom isn't religious but she still says
prayers every time she gets on the subway. Michael
wanted to buy her a gun, but she was worried i'd
find it and hurt myself. it would have been cool to
have one, even though i was a little kid when we'd
left.

when i ask my mom about it, she says i was lucky
that i skipped the decades before. i don't really talk
about her much, but i had an older sister; my par-

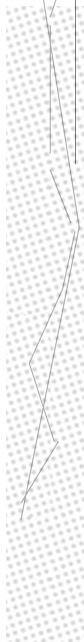
ents had her when they were young and still together. she died in a car accident or something, Michael said some drunk asshole she was with drove into a truck but mama says her boyfriend killed her out of jealousy. i think it pulled mama and Michael apart, but mama said she didn't really think about her too much. they talk more about an old dog they had back at their apartment. i don't really remember much about her. i wonder if we'd been close.

the strongest memory i have... i remember staying after school because i did bad on my math exam. some old fart lectured me for two three hours, ped-erast. it was close to winter so the dark already was setting, orange light coming through the big creaky windows. i walked down the stairs; in the corner by the elevator, i saw a girl sitting in a chair, trying to swallow her sobs. i whispered "hey, what's wrong..." but i came closer and i saw her face was covered in blood and i screamed. i heard rumbling steps come up the stairs; two big girls, one fat, blonde and the other caucasian-looking they told me to fuck off. i



was so scared i pissed myself and i dropped my little notebook and i ran so fast i fell down the stairs. my heart was beating so fast and my knees were bleeding too, but worst of all i felt no pain. I felt just shame, and i felt embarrassed for being so weak, so vulnerable. the whole day, the next few days i had weird fantasies; about having a knife, a gun, dying in a bloody gunfight. suddenly, i had a lot of violent thoughts, i'd daydream about killing, and every time i saw those two girls i'd feel my whole body tense up with anticipation and adrenaline. a girlfriend told me they sent the bloody girl back to Chechnya. i daydreamt about the girl's brothers coming to the school for revenge. i imagined the classes all filling up with fire, flames eating up the chairs and the books and the stupid whores and i'd feel the heat course through my body.

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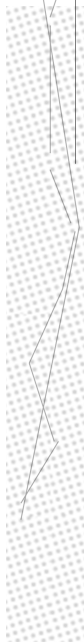


Synopsis

natalia wanders the zone populated by paramilitaries, influencers and the children of napalm and static breeding across the desert until even its sands dye into the blue-light glimpsed before artillery fire



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cw: death, guns, body image, bullying, sexual coercion, slut shaming, homophobia, slurs

Wow, 16 years old already. Time totally flies. I have no idea what comes next, or what I'll do when I graduate. I hope everything that is good in this short life comes to you guys.

--Elon Rao

A ring trembles in the air.

The livestream had already reached an audience of thousands. Though the link was spread only through peer-to-peer messaging apps, it's unlikely it would stay off the archives for long. On the face of it, all the sites are clean, minimal; pure business, content-delivery systems tightly controlled by thousands of battalions of Indian labor. Paradise surely is an HTTP server wiped so clean, history's filth could not tarnish it. But look through the gaps between the autofilters, the sorting algorithms, the censor-bots-- there's bits without name; untagged, unlisted. A

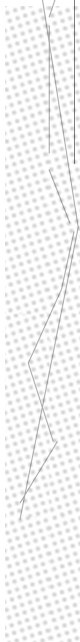
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SKY
TUBEN





wild bush of numbers, only pure static 'til the right constellation is cast. Outside the Gardens so heavy-handedly pruned & cut, worms squirm in the dead soil. Beneath the mud in the glow of a monitor, faceless organisms shake in constant orgasm-- fucking, dying, repeating. Every pulsating light is a spark of heat in the loins of soil, a flickering instance of life that drowns in the black. Once in a while, you catch a glimpse... 'tween the cooking videos, bullshit nothing-ads, complaints: a severed head, laying on your lap.

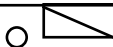
These were his useless thoughts as the boot forced him into the ground. The mud tasted of heavenly comfort, a reminder that even the worst pain will eventually give way to peaceful nothingness. When you think of your death, you rarely think of the mundane circumstances leading up to it. The boring car rides, the small-talk; you smell the burger but the pointlessness of your hunger robs you of any enthusiasm to eat. Funny little regrets come to mind now. I was too nice, probably. I shoulda fucked before all this began, or at least jerked off. He thinks of their eager eyelashes, their whispers. So much pussy I didn't get to have, for no reason at all but my own inaction. You think I'll go viral with this? He sees the red bursting in his vision, mangled by compressive foam-- zoom in, full-screen,





yeah kill him again and again with every replay. He dies anew every time.

They dragged him onto an orange tarp, splayed before a phone taped onto an AK-107 with its butt stuck into the soil. He saw the quirks of this particular AK-107; the worn-out trigger, the foreign magazine, a little anime girl etched on the receiver. "It's beautiful out here, ain't it." He turned onto his back-- the crickets were chirping, yearning for the pink belly of afternoon. The trees dance along. A bird perched upon a branch paid little heed, too engrossed in its own survival, hearing squirms of fear underneath every canopy. He heard a stream wash by beside them, water clattering up against a long-abandoned bunker. A man approached him-- first he saw his Yeezys, cream-colored but tarnished by the mud. Black pants; Balenciaga for sure, he recognized the stitching. Tactical vest with grenades, spare ammunition, a selfie stick. His face was covered by a balaclava, topped by a Supreme hat. Extremely mint fit, worthy of some great warrior immortalized in bars. Gold SIG 1911 .45 pimped out with the rubies sat in his holster. This gun fucks. And in his hand, a shimmering saber; dazzled by sunlight, he feels something cover up his head. The world goes black; the water, the crickets persist. He hears the bird's wings flutter away. He feels his throat swell up as



every cell of his body began to ache.

“Thank you guys out there for joining us on this livestream. Big shout-outs to all the subscribers, and the patrons we got. Big shout-outs to BabyGhoul, thanks for spreading the word. Hope you’re enjoying the content we’re putting out. Y’all, it’s crazy out here. But we’re gonna keep delivering to you folks, no matter what.” He hears the sharpening of the blade. “If you like what you see, give us a like-- subscribe.” He feels himself placed on a pedestal, uneasy plastic quivering under his weight. A boot presses into his back.

“Hold up. There’s something I wanted to talk to you guys about. I read all the comments from the old people like, ‘oh they’re commies. They’re fascist.’ Shit-- I don’t even know what communism is. But I know it’s some Boomer bullshit. You think I give a fuck what some old ass white bitch wrote? Nah. We do it for the ‘gram, man. We do it for the sauce. We kill for some fire ass shoes. We kill for the hype bitches. We kill to flex what we got. We’re out here to slay, seize the day, for nobody but ourselves-- and yeah, we do it for Hello Kitty and those Playstation cards. Thank y’all for those! We do it ‘cuz that’s the game out here. We do it because there’s no other life to live but this one, so





you gotta live it up and enjoy your life. We do it because... well, the stars out here are just beautiful. We do it to show you that you can live life the way you want to, on your own terms, and if you're working for some asshole your whole life, getting no fucking money... well that's your fault. Truth is, the real living's out here. And I want y'all to be a part of this. This is what life was meant to be, y'all." He hears footsteps approach, a voice straining. His throat wells up with panic, terrible spasms in his stomach, he starts to tremble, to shake. It's no use anymore.

"Anyway, that's all I wanted to say. Just clearing things up. Much love to everybody watching... oh, and stan BabyGirl!" With one swift movement of the sword his head disconnects from the body, the blood bursting from his neck and gushing all over the orange tarp; ceaseless red, like a river trickling onto the sweet-smelling grass to birth new life.

The torn covering on his head falls away. His eyes remained open, watching the phosphor sky turn purple.

It was still raining by the time Yelena got home from swimming practice. She was standing there under the guard of an awning, chewing on a Granola Stax while watching the water pour down the pipes of the Seven-Eleven, the towering business complex, the cafe with the good oat milk



and the pretty hearts in the coffee. From the thick glass elevator to her mother's apartment, you could see the pill-box warehouses, the farmer's markets, and the sky-scratching hotel-- and from the top, Yelena imagines herself floating on the tips of the buildings, talons tightly grasping the concrete, the firmly enclosing glass & steel not a barrier but only a dimple in the vast landscape that yields to her.

"I don't want you to go. I think, actually I forbid you." The lobby of the apartments were always empty; sleek surfaces undisturbed by the human touch. The rattling, snarling jazz-funk was always drowned out by the battery of machines-- conditioning machines, thousands of watts delivering comfort. Somewhere a pipe is heaving with oil, Earth blood pumped across mountains. Machine hum is the sound ghosts make when they're burned up for fuel; listen, you can hear them screaming all around you.

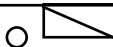
"I told you, no. You're not going." Yelena looks at herself in the fresh-smelling year book. She hates the chubby curves of her face, the angle of the bangs. She took her scissors and chopped at its edges, hoping for a novel hideousness. "Tears to Mona Lisa, Medusa to liquid," giggling at the quote below her picture. She draws daggers, bleeding, aimed at all the bitches with wide purses & pussies but





no brains. “hehe,” she replies. The kid below her wore a fading t-shirt, pimpled face below the greasy hair. “I don’t know how I got here. I don’t know where I’m going. I hope everything great happens for you all,” I see you Elon Rao. I see you all, Raise it up y’all.

Limbs pulsating with pain, Yelena laid in her bed. Boom-clap. Above her, blue prints and schematics of a T-72 tank slowly peeled from the wall. Through the window, he’s shouting at me and just me. Three woman turned their asses to the screen. Droplets of sweat take flight, fat shaking; she sucks on her lips. “Corny video, good song,” hyperlinked. “I want a big ass like that,” she responds. Chinese anaconda with a golden tooth. “These buns take cash only,” ASCII giggles. Yelena’s mother knocked, entering anyway. “Slushaj,” she said. Yelena turned onto her side, away from her mother. “Slushaij, Yelena.” Her mother sat at the edge of the bed, her dark eyes flickering. “O tebye zabachus. Moya Lenochka, moy tolko adin.” Yelena sighed, loudly with her whole body; given the power of a child, she finds it easy to revert. Shouting, pointing a grimy finger at her chocolate-covered hole. Spoiled little brat, doing it just to see how far the mother’s hand twists-- she fights the feeling, a child yearning to stomp an insect.

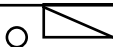


"If I wanna go, you can't stop me," schoolyard bluff. The room sat silent. Mama's credit card details should still be logged somewhere. Yelena's mother looked across the room; the posters of black rappers with contorted fingers, bling-bling on the leather seats, dollar-dollar bill stuck in a thong... there in the middle, a picture of a shack with blackened wood. Beyond its frosted windows, hazy stretches of taiga receded from the crisp autumn brown and slowly melting into white frontier. In the winter, the deadening chill could make your own heart beat like a metal drum. Suffocated by the smoke, noise of crowded homes caked in oil and sweat, Yelena's mother relished the banal reprieve of eating grandma's berry jam at her country house. She missed the softness of grandma's voice as she cooed along to scratchy bootlegs-- this man's diamond-studded teeth and gold chains would have sounded to her like screams of a distant alien civilization. She gets up from the bed... the books, the little Buddha statue, a few bullets, a picture of Christine and her daughter. Right; she reasons with herself that rebellion in children is natural, even necessary for an independent and strong will-- must the spirit always be the first casualty in mutiny? It would have been simpler for her own mother, cooped-up in their little village together. It's easier to inoculate your child from the terror of the world when the world comes through only in



teeny-tiny slivers of light. She remembers how her mother would cover up the gray mirror of the television with lace, frightened of its radiation. She can't shake the feeling that even at this young age, her daughter knows more about this world than she herself ever will. In American life, rot exists under the surface-- once it exposes its festering insides to you, you're already in too deep.

"It would have been easier if your father was still here," with her arms crossed she returns to Yelena's side. Yelena turns onto her back; her mother seemed so frail, like a hatchling rising from a brown sweater. The rebellion tasted bitter when she swallowed it. "It's just a summer camp, mama." She rose up as her mother sat beside in embrace, seeking warmth. "Nothing can happen to me there." Yelena stroked her mother's hair. "I'm not a little devotchka. I'm a grown woman." Yelena's mother dug her face into her daughter's shoulder. "And don't mention dad, please. I still have to see that jerk. Take his money." Her mother rose up slightly in protest. "Tvoi papa. Nye, nye zabijvai." "Yeah yeah, no za-bu-v-ay." The phone vibrates. Sports star. A man chases another man with a machete, it's all anyone's talking about at in summer chats. Mrs. Nabokova closes the door to her daughter's bedroom and tenderly shuffles to the fridge. In the light of the open fridge, she



quietly watches the eggs & milk grow warm. She disappointed herself, she hears her father's voice: how pathetic to mourn the things you cannot change. She takes the cheese, bites a chunk, two chunks out of it, and places it back in the fridge.

I had this weird dream.

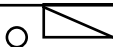
Yelena-- a jarring motion, her stomach churning as she rolled through a room grander than anything she's ever seen-- windows made of glass, but the sun so bright they shone like burning squares of light. She's not walking, she's dripping away; like water, she's flowing. She sees herself reflected in every wall, in every floor; she hears music in the far distance, so far that when it reaches her ears its only the sizzling haze of a violin, a harp, a guitar, a drum. The stones call to her, speaking with a foreign but familiar voice. The pebbles screamed. Sand groans.

Her chest is bare, unashamed, a cold breeze comes through the air and ripples through her black cargo pants. She sees her reflection in the glass; she recoils, she jumps, gasps. The head of a teeny-tiny doe grew from where her neck had been, eyes placid, heavy with musty fur. A roar comes from the innards of the valley. The edges of her being form the point of a dagger. She pulls the arrow to her neck,



flames simmering at its tip as the bow groans under the pressure. She takes aim at the walls. The walls burn away, falling to the floor to reveal it as smoke, mirror; a shimmering waterfall comes through the facade, waves clattering onto the stones far below obscured by the aching fog. Her eyes fall shut, the arrow releases and whistles through the trees, through the leaves, through life itself, without bondage, vines, roots growing in every direction as the insect crawls up its tree, as the vulture falls on its carcass, as every cell within the soil cries out in tender agony while worms writhe in the flesh. The doe falls dead.

I had this weird dream. “?. Wha happen.” She whispers into her phone, her voice might frighten it away. I had this weird dream, that I was in a forest somewhere. Or a cave, and there was water rushing in. And everything was huge, like you could see trees & rocks for miles. But for some reason I didn’t feel it was any distance at all like, for some reason I felt just by my own will I could traverse over all of it, I felt, just by my own will that it was all mine and that the palm of my own hand with its peaks, its seams, was no smaller than the vast rushing rivers & heaving trees that were before me. I felt that I heeded the call, like, it had a question for me and now I was answering. And I heard them screaming through the forest, and I heard them



laughing, I heard singing and I ran through the forest and I searched for them.

What happens then?

I see something. A flicker comes through the trees-- the flame of a candle growing as it sucks up its neighboring air. I see something. The valley below me becomes engulfed in flames; a brilliant orange, a searing yellow, crimson & red pouring & spilling onto the cluttered floors of the forest. I see something. A figure reveals itself from 'tween the trees; flames rising from its shoulders, from its torso, from its head... a procession of sparks & embers following in its wake. It has no face, a tattered black cloth covers its naked body, and I see something, I see multiple figures grow out from the dark, wearing rusted chains & ancient symbols now a mystery. I see every languid step it takes, formless black cotton billowing, glowing with gold, I see something as it runs beneath me drifting in, drifting out of the branches, hiding itself in the leaves but I sense no remorse for the flame, nothing is kept from the flame 'n the figure is so free that I cannot even see the shape of its limbs, the contours of its legs, the skin of its arms - black cloth bursting, shrinking like a heavy lung that inhales, exhales flames and though the heat kisses my lips,





brushes my fingers my chest, I feel no shame and I could only watch with every part of my body arrested, yearning for the heat.

It was as if some incredible secret behind everything I knew had suddenly been whispered to me.

Yelena drifted in, out of sleep there on the sides of the river. "Not a morning person," she whispered to herself as she rubbed her face with her hands. In the morning, she'd been woken up with the smack of a pillow-- "ssssh," Christine slithered away like a snake and disappeared into the fire beyond the open door. They trekked up the mountains in their pee-jays, towels hanging from their shoulders, holding hands 'n peeling oranges as they nervously jittered from one tipsy rock to another. Beneath Yelena the black rot beckoned, its soft branches sharp with wolves teeth, its ravines heaving with laughter. Shutting her eyes; "come on, let's go!" the valley spoke back. A carcass laid dry on a bed of stone, its hide hung from a withered tree. She feels her muscles releasing, the skin of her feet turning to water-- body split into pieces by the jagged rocks, its disparate components realized. Gut, breast, heart; a confederacy of machines that buzz & hum, aching to produce life.



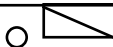
She shut her eyes and leaped. She opened her eyes and the pitiless ocean welcomed her with a hungry wave.

Sometimes she'd squeal as the bursts of water landed onto her skin, frigid there in the early morning wind. Even amongst friends, she still felt some embarrassment; she covered her body, its incomplete, billowing features hidden from the prying eye of other teenage girls. Looking at the taut perfection of others, their flesh precious investments maintained & kept, she feels as if she's staring into the decomposing guts of a roadside kill who spreads its legs and irrefutably shows its own wretched nature. A part of her resists; she's reminded of her own mother's revolting envy, dragging her daughter by the arm, violently, to show that little girl guts fared no better under the wheel. Then she'd pull little Yelena closer, remembering what she'd seen on the news. She wondered if the other moms obsessed like her mother? No, undoubtedly their blood showed refinement; jeweled trophy girls who would have been swept up by the greedy, powerful pedophile and never subdued by the indignities of primitive, servile living. She hated them. She felt like a faulty Swarovski crystal surrounded by factory perfection; each defect only made the more apparent. "Oh," she catches herself. A little hare hopped through the grass. Yelena jumped up, shooed and



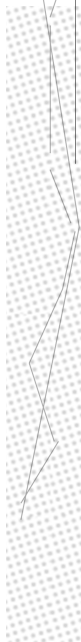
frightened it away, praying for safety from the wolf.

Three girls sit in the bushes across from her, stifled giggling, little attention paid to those hurtling off the pier into the water. Yelena'd like to think that some of the giggles were about her, to find in mockery a recognition of their disparate fates. She'd welcome the honesty-- "yes, we admit it Yelena. We're through pretending. Your mother was right. Now kiss the asphalt." Maybe it could happen. She doubts it. Christine came out of the waters, her jet-black hair a shroud over her skin. "Why you sitting here like a fucking lesbo perv," she said in that sing-song voice, rising pitch on the 'perv.' Islands of grey ancient stone crackled with sparkling water. Christine squat before Yelena, her brown eyes growing twice their size. "Are you," getting quieter towards the end, "PMS-ing?" Yelena hid her face, shaking with laughter. The girls loosely draped themselves in towels, hurrying back to base camp before the inevitable brow-beating counselors awoke. Christine looked back at Yelena, teeth click-clacking, shivering as she pulled the towel tighter around her minute body, signaling for a picture with her fingers. "For the gram, Lena!" Through the mud, they trekked up the caverns, on the trail down from the hills where the wooden summer houses stood 'n above the empty depths of stone in which the crickets, shimmer-



ing of leaves echoed. Woodpecker rattle, Yelena watched from the wooden porch as the sun rose from the mouth of the canyon. Part of it had been scorched black in a wild fire; she imagined the awe of seeing it closely, the skies turning red like Gehenna, flickering flame burning on your cheeks. Oh, how she ached to stay out here.

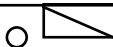
If you want it, you take it. She quietly settled back into her bunk, under a banker's daughter who snored. The sweat-shirt felt soft on her wet skin, she tried to hide the frayed edges under her legs. Christine came up to her in her hopeful Yale hoody, shaking up nail polish with her teeth sticking out. "Lemme do this," like Theresa anointing the damned. "It's cute," 'n Christine sat in Yelena's bed painting toe nails with a silver-opal sheen, forehead rippling with concentration. "I like it when we're wearing our pajamas." The break in silence surprised Christine, she expects nothing from the ever-pensive Yelena. "It makes it feel like we're all the same. You know, like we're just girls hanging out," Yelena murmured, yawned. Christine looked at the other girls, slipping into their tee-shirts, leggings; before the day started, no-one cared to show their wealth, no shade, no backhanded compliments. "It's peaceful," Christine answered as she put the final touches on Yelena's big toe. She looks up, smiles, puts the brush back into the





nail polish. “Reminds me of like, when I used to go into the mountains with my dad in Taiwan. It was nice. Trees don’t care who you are, right?” Yelena’s toothy smile ‘neath pale eyes showed Christine that she had an uncultivated sweetness, a ripening strawberry still on the vine. She felt protective of Yelena; she would cry in impotent shame when the other girls would mock her behind her back, mimicking the ruthlessness their parents had towards the lesser, the common. It’s not so rare, she reckons, but yet as soon as one of us well-to-do folks falls, they’re covered up, their spot taken as if they never really existed. Her parents took pity on Yelena, even making sure she’d have something under the tree during the big family Christmas Eves, but Mrs. Nabokova’s very presence arose superstition as if she’d carry a wind of contagious poverty with her. They’d gossip about her shoes, how much Mr. Nabokov paid in allowance. Christine never asked Yelena what Mrs. Nabokova did on Christmas Eve.

“There,” Christine twisted the nail polish cap back on. Yelena stretched out her legs, shaking her painted toes. “You like it?” Yelena nodded. “That’s Louboutin. Don’t say I don’t take care of you, babe.” ‘n just across on the next bunk, the fizzle of heavy music in a little babe’s ear... motherfucker scrawled in the notebook. “So run!” A gig-

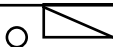


gle rattles through the radiator. It's something like community. Christine kissed Yelena on the forehead, pulling the covers over her shivering body. She flinks; Yelena easily coulda turned into them weird girls with greasy hair, school shooters with the faggy black pants dissecting the skinny bitches with a buckshot razor. One of Yelena's pale eyes looked back-- Christine wonders what Yelena could see that she herself could not. What would I see through those sad little jewels there in the night?

She thought of herself riding in the backseat of a car. His golden rings & diamond things dazzle brilliantly even there in the darkness of phone screens & dashboard lights. The streetlights flicker by her. She can feel him breathing through the seats, the V8 roar of his body. Every time he raises his hands to pull a phone from his coat, she flinches. The fear keeps her there, present, unwilling to burrow herself into the darkened car of her pointless fantasies. Present, alert; like a doe hunted by the mountain lion. She touches the aches, the bruises on her body, her face... as if her own body was simply territory to be marked. She'd always felt like a blank surface, but now she's given definition, one bloody wound at a time. The sensations make her weak at the knees. She wished beauty was forever.



The morning was a haze to Yelena; disturbed sleep always made her head feel like a balloon, heaving with helium, her eyes perched atop a great height. There's a coming, there's a taking and the little globules of white sunscreen on pristine skin; she takes for the yellowing woods, safely hidden from the excruciating screeches of the camp counselors. Leaves crunch 'neath the muddy sneakers 'n the river splashes down from the rocks. It's only in the silence of water hurtling, the panicked jitter of drowning ants, that she feels the depths of the sickness, the nausea living caused her. She ignores the buzzing in her pocket, Christine warning her of the imminent consequences: they're gonna send you back home for breaking camp rules. Through the leaves, she hears the whining of the free colts, their muscles glistening in the chill of the lake. There's a bracing terror in her shoulders, of inevitable decline. A bush of beautiful wild flowers, fleshy purples & decadent oranges, swaying to the sensuous morning wind. Yelena watched it for a few moments, feeling the histamines flood her nostrils. She stomped her foot into the flowers... the fleshy purples melt into muddy browns, the decadent oranges ooze mushy green. Hormonal tears suddenly flooded into her face. She turned her back to the glittering lake and headed for camp.



An orange cloud filled the valley with smoke, crickets chirping their mating song coming alive in the afternoon fog as a torrent of ants spills open from a hole. Christine pulled out a map, circling around B3, C6 with her pink gel pen. "Here's the boys' camp. We'll attack during the late night, when they'll be tired from kayaking and shit. Don't aim for the eyes, we want 'em alive." Christine's strength had always been her decisiveness-- in her mind, there was no straying from the goal, whether it was getting 100% on her IBs or one-hundred-thousand likes. Her friends loaded BBs into their air-powered guns. "You do something, you do it right." Mud erupted through the gaps of their toes, leaving traces behind them as they ascended the cliffs with the fading sun glowing on their backs. She hears the roar of a sacred tiger rattle through the cliffs. They split into two firing groups, never static but always trickling 'cross the landscape, their Daisy BB Guns slung over their shoulders. Their best ally was the terrain, meticulously studied through stories on the 'gram, paths charted through snaps. Yelena stayed back, promising to act as rear guard-- tho troof was that she wanted to see the sun fizzle out in the deathly embrace of the river. She wipes away the mud from her feet, comparing their jagged skin to the lacquered wood of her bolt-action BB gun. She hears howling in the distance, the birds



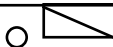
take flight from their tender branches and flee into the indifferent sky. The boys' camp had fed the girls' camp faulty information through well-timed snaps, making sure screenshots were taken. There had never been kayaking, rather the boys waited for the girls and surrounded them with an arsenal of water-guns and icy hoses. After they'd be sprayed with frigid water, their shivering bodies were released only once they'd paid the ransom of ten minutes in the bushes and a friend request-- a high price to pay for learning the cost of war.

A deep thump.

Yelena rose up from the sunroof, feeling the wind tear through her clothes, her hair whipping violently behind her. She felt the turbo rattle under her feet, the low grumble 'tween every thump. She extended her arms towards the sun, welcoming its warm embrace. All the little petty things of winter melt down in summer.

A deep thump.

The car beside honked, and the window fell down and a boy fixed up his baseball cap before raising his arm in the air and his arms swung along and he hollered, he raved 'n swung and smiled to the thumping before Christina vio-



lently veered away and took the exit under the bridge.

Yelena fell back down onto the backseat, rattling the driver's seat with a few sharp kicks as she fixed her hair. "You fucking bitch, you almost killed me;" she shouted with a loud cackle. Christina bumped up the volume, her creaky yelps ("shawty wanna lick") failing to ("lick") follow along ("lick") with the twisting verse. Yelena, feeling her ears fizzle from the double iced-coffees, stuck her face up to the window and watched the two, three, four story townhouses whiz by. "Hey, Chris, who live in these?" Christina accelerates down the finely-paved residential road, her palms oozing sweat and her eyes pulsating with concentration. "Fags and losers," Christine smirked, twitching with naughty power before making a rash turn that tumbles Yelena onto her back.

The streets smelled like burnt rubber, and a worrying smoke came from the wheels of Christine's silvery sedan. "One of these days," Yelena grumbled, "one of these days," trying to hold onto her stomach contents. "One of these days, you're gonna develop a sense of humor," Christine shot back, desensitized to death-rides as her dulled ears still quiver from the music. She walked to her trunk and removed a large leather bag; seeming even more meek, pe-

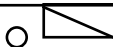




tite with her flip-flops and pink hat. She thought of the little hare, thumping through the grass. “What’s that?” Yelena asked as she shut the passenger door behind her. Christine grinned, showing off that one chipped tooth that brought menace to those immaculate ivories. “I’ll show you just in a ‘sec,” she whispered. The car chirped. They walked up the driveway, through the garage into the backyard where Christine’s tiny Maltese came wheezing with a pink-bow beneath her agonized face. Yelena ducked down, “hey Chouchou,” and the Maltese barked ‘n bit her hand, prompting Christine to growl and kick the dog away into a yelping retreat.

“That was kinda harsh,” Yelena said with concern as she nursed her sore hand. “Fuck that dog,” Christine cursed as she motioned for Yelena to go through the screen door. They slowly shuffled through the shaggy carpet, slouched like rats in a kitchen. Yelena made it to the stairs but Christine bumped her black bag on a table, causing a vase to tumble onto the floor with a loud thud. “Christine? Sii naye maa?” though Yelena wasn’t sure what she heard. “Sii, mama! Just working!” ‘n she motioned Yelena to go up the stairs, pushing the black bag into her back like a spear.

Yelena looked at the massive collage of pictures that lined



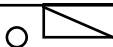
the bedroom, each of them a small monument to Christine's will. Look closer, excuse the dust: you'll see the skiing trips, the tennis championship trophies, nights on the town and weekends at the cabin, cheek-to-cheek with musicians, birthdays and weddings and Chinese monuments, and often Yelena tucked under an arm or a shoulder. She plucked one from the wall, showing a young Yelena astride a beautiful brown horse and Christine stroking its mane. "You still have this?" Yelena giggled, feigning her surprise. Christine dropped the bag onto her bed, doing a few stretches to sooth her back before turning to see the picture. "Of course. Of course, I loved that big-dicked monster," she snarled as she did her side angle poses. Glis-tening slivers of light came off the pool under Christine's window, crystal shards cutting through the many memories that burnt up in the sun. Folding herself in half, surrounded by white shards, Yelena suddenly saw Christine as an island onto herself, in which impressions of the outside world were distorted, refracted before they hit her eyes.

"So what's in the bag?" Yelena blurted out. Christine rose up from her stretch, little beads of sweat gathering on her forehead. Her strained face slowly melted into that same sly grin, drippings from her feline cheeks. "Something cool," she whispered as she wiped her forehead before undoing





the zipper of the black bag. “I got it through a friend’s friend in Mexico. Cost a fortune to get here but I just had to hold it before I sent it off.” In Christine’s moisturized hands, a horrible greasy machine slick with polish showed its sharp wooden head. “Oh, wow,” Yelena muttered under her breath. She saw “AV,” “OD” etched in Russian on the receiver. Christine jerked the firing bolt backward, revealing the shining guts, hot angry steel. “Look at how you can fold the stock. Imagine getting hit by this fucker,” she hissed. Though they’d both shared clips, little files named with anonymous strings of unearthly numbers, the fantasy of bullets penetrating flesh remained precisely that. Postcards inked with stage blood. They were not party to the pain, the waiting & waiting, an oppressive atmosphere of boredom fouling up the air. “What is it called?” Yelena whispered, feeling a strange kinship. “Didn’t you watch the video I sent you?” Christine looked at the chips in the hand guard, the decades of dirt & luck caked onto the dark wood. Holding the chilled metal, she felt the apathy of history nervously tremble in her bones; a relic, a fetish that suggested another ancient world begging to be reborn. “It’s kinda cute, isn’t it? When it’s small like this.” She folded it and placed it into the bag, feeling her heart tremble as she shut the zipper. “It’s like an angry little bee. I wish we could play with it.”



Christine's mother invited Yelena down for reheated stir fries & microwave-dried meat, all in orbit around a hot-cold bowl of white goo. She smiled along to every one of Yelena's murmurs of excitement, noisy chews, quietly wondering what awful fare the poor child was exposed to at home. "You can have as much as you like," her head gently bobbing along. She'd often send Yelena home with plastic bags full of rolls & dumplings & left-over soup, Mrs. Nabokova howling, swearing the alien oils & spices gave way to sickness. Above the puffy bags of skin, Yelena perceived searching flames; Christine's mother applied moisturizer to her sleek arms and rubbed fiercely. "Everything good? Everything OK?" Yelena slurped on a soft piece of tomato. "Christine always talks about you. I think you're a very good friend to her." Yelena nodded along. Christine's mother worked in finance, or technology, or something finance-technology as a lawyer, or something a little lower than that. Christine never talked about her parents, even when they took Yelena along on lavish trips, fine banquets, cute little getaways to stone-paved coastal towns that once had men with black hands & terrible coughs. Christine never talked about her father, ears buzzing with Business Class hum and mouth glum with whiskey, sending his love through the phone at the start of Ladies' Night. The land of women was a pleasant one; albeit, a lonely one.



With an egg roll in her hand, Yelena walked down towards the garden where Christina posed with her phone. Through the opening made by the luscious vines, twisting and entwined like mating snakes, swaying in the wind, Yelena watched the kissy-faces, the yoga stances, the finger-guns pointed to the temple-- a horrible rattle ached through the phone's miniscule speakers, and she did close-ups of the constellation of her bruises, cuts, dents. What you're looking at, Christina's not there, it's not happening. A thousand girls squirm in Christina's high-definition drool, dropping down her slick throat. A piece of corn fell from Yelena's egg roll onto the fresh dirt. You're seeing a shadow, a trick of the mind that demands continuity. She shot a kiss to the phone, then bit her finger until she drew blood. A ding and a comment popped up: I would die for you, Christina. "Welcome to the tribe, bestie." While we twirl our little pens around our fingers, she's in the back imagining herself painted in blue-black. She has her little kiddie fingers drawn around bleached bone, she's so so afraid. Stroke the screen with your tender finger; she lays there beside money shots of exploding tank shells and scorched clay, distant accordions weeping along. "I'm gonna see all y'all in the Zone, next week. Next week; making it happen, meet-and-greet every day, right there under the sun and the stars, baby." She blew another



kiss to the phone, fluttering her lashes, her neck exposed--
“don’t I look obedient and vulnerable, guys?”

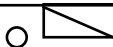
“Everything’s ready,” Christina whispered. Yelena brushed her teeth, closing the window as the chill rippled through her pajamas-- a little palm tree at an oasis rotting at the edges. The screen buzzed, the controller vibrated; men sharp like metal marched into the stench of their Remington fates. “Everything’s ready,” at night the house creaked, groaned; she heard Christina’s mother laugh downstairs. She laid down beside Christina’s bed; the same little pony-clad blankets, an old familiar little bear. In the glow of orange, the phone buzzed on Christina’s face, flickers of shades in her eyes. “Jesus, you sleep with that thing?” Yelena croaked, she spat out into her cup. Christina giggled-- “you don’t really get it,” she grinned; she cackled. “But that’s okay. That’s why I like you, Lena.” Yelena huffed, shaking her head: “you’re so strange. I like you too.” Christine laughed again, letting her phone fall onto her chest. “Do you want to hear? You wanna hear about it?” Yelena shut off the desk lamp; bars of sliver-y moon shuttered the entire room. Christina laid above the blankets of her memory foam coffin, white heat burning on her limbs. Whispers tugged at her ear. The floor creaked with laughter. “Everything’s working my way,” she shifted onto





her side towards Yelena, her phone tumbling down. In the soft anonymous glow of television, Christina's face shimmered with life. "Do you think they'll make videos about me, Lena?" Yelena couldn't keep her composure-- her face burst into a shrill giggle, and Christina's fangs followed along, and a teeny-tiny mouse creaked through the cracks in the floor, little whiskers drunk on laughter. "Fuck it, let's stay up."

She stumbled down the stairs, wiping her sweaty head as she looked for a mug in the dark. She tried to piece together the visions into something cohesive, every waking minute seemed to obliterate the past. "Valeriana tchai, Lenochka;" she listened to the rolling shimmer, the water boiling on the stove. Christina's mother had fallen asleep on the couch, mouth agape and thick with moist snoring. The visions were always the same, but different. Warm milk on the lips would soften her crying when she was a child thrown awake by constant nightmares. Yelena was jealous of the restful silence on the woman's face; she was jealous of any silence, the stillness of open spaces yet to be predated upon by terrible thoughts. She envied the weightlessness of the other girls, unburdened by worry, freely hopping from one platform to another like fairies. Split open the little teenybopper's skull and you won't find a



hive of greedy wasps, fucking on each other with slick, hot yellow bodies-- no, you'll find a massive eye staring back at you and a coy 'lil giggle. Yelena sips on the grass-y tea, disgusting in a warm and familiar way.

I had this weird dream.

I was on an orange disk, the taut edges extended into every corner of the horizon. I walked towards the light, the cold chill of nothing lashed my exposed back. And I saw you, bigger than any mountain or machine; I saw you pass by over me like a burning bird of prey. And you fizzled up in the atmosphere, and turned the sky into ash. And then everything became dark, but I was still there. I was alone.

Strange.





Name: Leona Lillywhite

Birthday: December 4

Sex: female (by choice)

Occupation: NEET

Theme song: Sheer Mag -
Night Isn't Bright

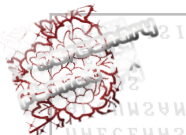
Likes: gun customization,
spicy snack food, noisy
shoegaze, Memphis rap, Sim
City, golden age sf, revenge
movies, tragic anime charac-
ters, helping people, imagin-
ing yaoi ships as yuri ships

Dislikes: public affection, ex-
pensive clothes, cocaine,
old Hollywood movies, fake
friends, restaurant decor, drag
shows, soft-boiled eggs



Theme song: Sheer Mag -
Night Isn't Bright

Note from Provisional Undersecretary of Operations:

Tracking our POI's history didn't pose a challenge for our analysts. Making sense of her did. We consulted sixteen subject matter experts in the course of assembling


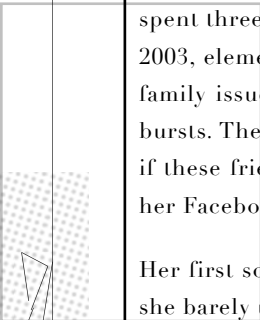




by: [baroquepiral](#) + Escher McDonell



this dossier. And by “subject matter experts” I mean we had to put a call out on Teams to see if anyone knew what a “futanari” is. We have had to assemble dossiers on many transgenderists in the course of this work-- on the off-chance they involve themselves in actual terrorism, usually, though this individual does not fit the profile. Lillywhite doesn’t fit the profile of a typical terrorist and wouldn’t be a POI if it weren’t for the current social circumstances. Anyway, if you find yourself as baffled as I was, I’d recommend reviewing the appendices or set up a meeting with the subject matter experts. Considering the challenges and opportunities brought on by our visitor’s arrival, I believe it vital that we understand this person.

POI Lillywhite’s footprints appear around age 10 (Seems late E.). Based on school records, before 10 she spent her time on unstructured physical activity outside, but maintained good grades in language arts and hands-on activities-- her records show a patter of periodic violent altercations with other students. No explanations are noted. These preferences seem consistent with her family’s





values (see Appendices C-17 for Psych's write-up on the domestic terrain). Her parents nearly divorced twice in the period before the ten-year mark. It is not clear how much Lillywhite was aware of this. Though we have reason to believe things were bad enough that the mother spent three months living with a friend in New Jersey in 2003, elementary school counsellors do not refer to any family issues in their notes on Lillywhite's violent outbursts. They do note that all her friends were girls, but if these friendships were real, they are not reflected on her Facebook network.



Her first social media were Facebook and Snapchat but she barely uses these. Data Analytics informs us that she spent most of her time online reading pirated manga while listening to music in a private and VPN-protected browser. Her tastes in both are polarized between extreme (extreme violence, emotions, or sexuality) and content our in-house hentai expert has described as "very gentle". She has a notable interest in structures and systems expressed in forms like worldbuilding (at age 11-12 she was an active editor on the Magic the Gathering lore wiki, clocking over 400 hours on the site in the spring of

2008). Taste in pornographic fanfics and doujinshi escalates from age 11-14, stop abruptly, and only resume when she discovered the parasocial sex work and fanart economy on Tumblr, where she adopts an ethical principle of only consuming explicit content by people she maintains a relationship with. Several private Snapchat accounts record a slide into delinquency (frequent partying, alcohol, vandalism, drug abuse) that corresponds with a decline in her grades and mental health, as well as marking the most time she spends with males her own age. In grade ten, a Vice Principal notes possibly investigating Lillywhite's home situation, but does not follow through.

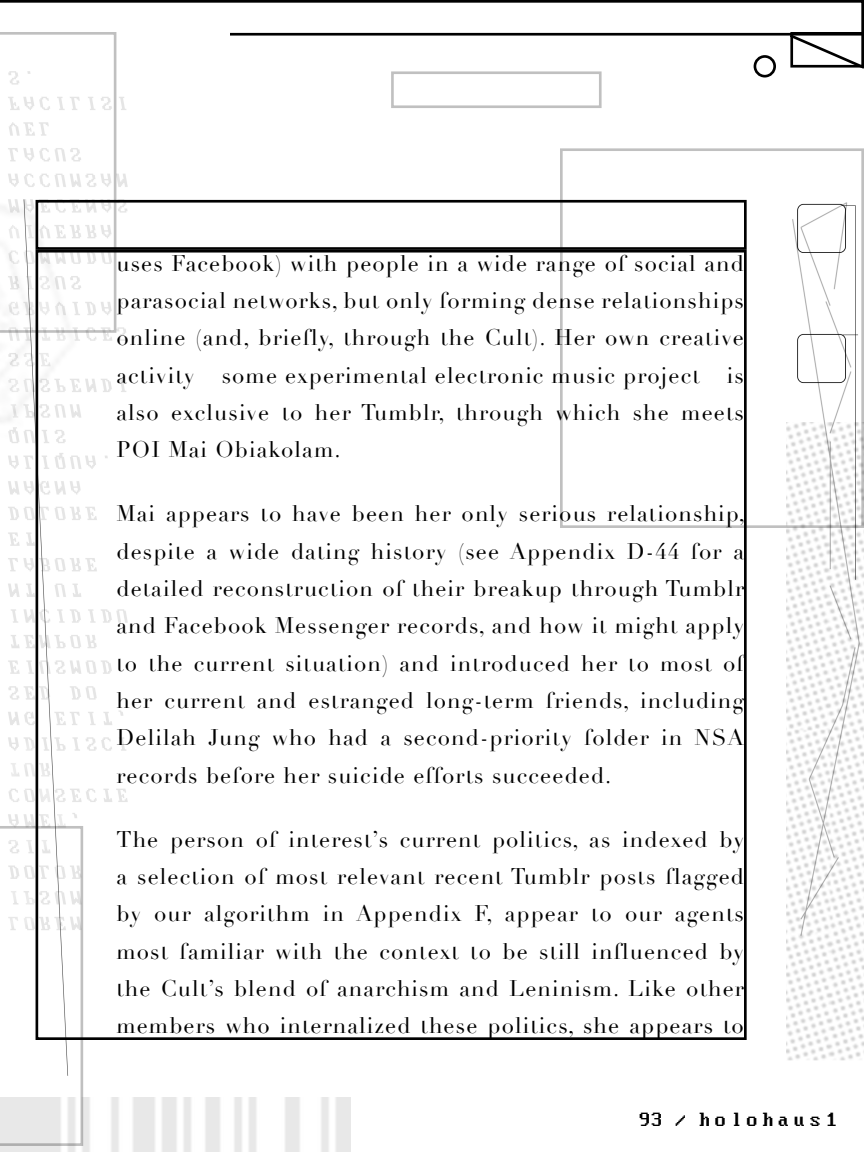
She gets her act together by grade 12 with a no-holds-barred effort to pull her grades back up. Her social studies teacher in this subject wrote an impassioned, 3-page letter in support of Lillywhite's university applications and she lands a scholarship to the University of Washington. During this year her online presence almost vanishes save for two crucial areas: she creates a Tumblr (actually her second, after one she used in middle school for lurking) and starts reading radical literature online (as part of



a broad program of study of social and political thought, that also includes canonical liberal and historical texts, but investigates the radical tradition above and beyond the needs of university preparation - e.g. as well as Marx and Bakunin she reads recent anarchists like Fredy Perlman). Psych's personality network models mark this as a nodal tipping point in her life.





From university on her online record is much denser and I will let the extensive documentation in the folder for this period speak for itself (see Appendix D-23). Almost immediately she switches to he/they pronouns on Tumblr and in some class assignments; the idea probably did not arise from her social setting at the time, but dates back at least to the nodal tipping point. For eighteen months she was a member of the Cult of Black Domnu, but did not appear to participate in any of our recruitment or influence operations connected with the Cult. She began using she/her pronouns on her Tumblr during this period. Location tracking information shows she is superficially outgoing during this period, active in both music and activism scenes, as well as attending parties and forming Facebook friendships (she still barely



uses Facebook) with people in a wide range of social and parasocial networks, but only forming dense relationships online (and, briefly, through the Cult). Her own creative activity — some experimental electronic music project — is also exclusive to her Tumblr, through which she meets POI Mai Obiakolam.


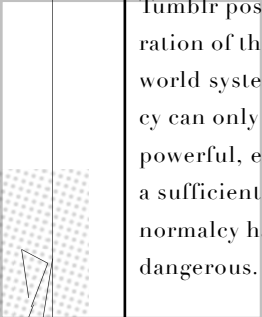
Mai appears to have been her only serious relationship, despite a wide dating history (see Appendix D-44 for a detailed reconstruction of their breakup through Tumblr and Facebook Messenger records, and how it might apply to the current situation) and introduced her to most of her current and estranged long-term friends, including Delilah Jung who had a second-priority folder in NSA records before her suicide efforts succeeded.

The person of interest's current politics, as indexed by a selection of most relevant recent Tumblr posts flagged by our algorithm in Appendix F, appear to our agents most familiar with the context to be still influenced by the Cult's blend of anarchism and Leninism. Like other members who internalized these politics, she appears to

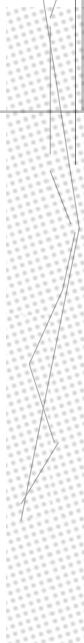
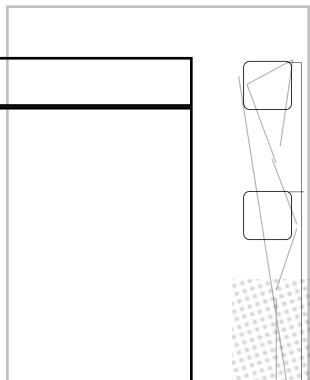


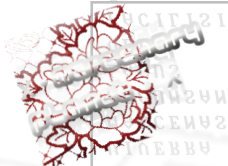
have retreated from concrete activism in the past two years, outside of mutual aid and transgender issues.

Unlike others, particularly those who rejected the Cult, she does not appear to have deradicalized. Her recent Tumblr posts (see Appendix G) suggest a personal elaboration of these ideas based on the idea that the dominant world systems of capitalism, colonialism and bureaucracy can only be dismantled with the influence of a radical, powerful, external force. These beliefs would have been a sufficient justification for lifelong retreat and eventual normalcy had recent events not made them exceptionally dangerous.



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Synopsis

clinging to a single desperate prayer, leona meets halation, a visitor from that supposed better world once held remote by the thousands of atrocities that littered the earth, and draws war and peace towards a collision spanning the galaxy.

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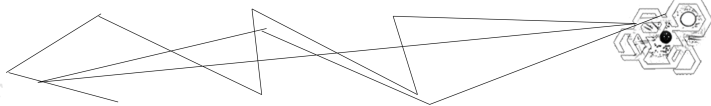


ew: transphobia, dysphoria, drugs, guns, abusive family, death, poverty, mind meld, religion

Figures it would take something like this happening to kick my ass into starting on this journal. People I know always tell me I'm good at doing the self-care things, but only when - because? - I don't think of them as that. I've never been under any misapprehension that exercising or taking care of plants or whatever is going to help me, they're just things I have reasons to be doing no matter how far down I am, no less than staying alive if you put it that way. Now journalling is the same. I'm in a situation where I can't help but write. Still, I wonder if there's a reason I've even been thinking about it this long. I can't remember how this came up, or why or even when I think I made a commitment to do it at some point, why it feels so serious whenever I think of it, as if I made it to some other person, although the one thing I'm sure of is I didn't. Or maybe it's just everything has this brightness

STRANGER & HOMECOMING

2
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AET
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23E
202BEND1
112NW
0N12
VR10NV
WVENV
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FVBORV
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1B2W
ROBEN



and weight right now. One reason I never started this is half the things I feel, I might feel something that supercedes completely the next day. Of course that's the point, but it seems exhausting and Sisyphean, keeping up with myself, accumulating change after change but never pruning for meaning.

Tonight I did something. Something big. No matter what I feel like days or months or years from now, I'm going to want to know how I felt when I did it. How it made me fumble a wording or run on a sentence. Hell, I'm probably not the only person who'll want to know.

God, what if this becomes a document of monumental historical significance to humanity some day? Well, if humanity's still the same assholes by then they won't be able to do anything to me since I'm dead, and I've decided I don't care how anybody remembers me - so let's do this, let's rub future academics' faces in the smelly taint of my life. Wow, this reads just like the diary I always wanted when I wasn't a little girl already. Actually, who knows what those read like? Do even cis girls know if theirs are like anybody else's? You saw them in TV and books, but the point of those is to be public, and the point of a diary is to be private.





Nobody's gonna see this when I'm alive, and I'll burn it before I die if I get the chance.

(Unless, maybe, they want to keep it.)

But if I wanted to be private, I'd just think.

I didn't really want to go out shooting with my brother, but after two weeks home I had faced the truth that I didn't have anything else to do, and I didn't really have a reason to not hang out with him that was actually his fault. I couldn't keep resenting him for what my mom said on the phone on the way home - "I don't mind... I can't stop you with this girl thing, but you don't act like that around your brother, that's the rules OK? He really admires you, and you're one of the few good influences left in his life."

Fine, I thought, that's the rules, it's your house, but you never said I had to be that good influence. If I'm a good influence on him that just ties me down to this place where I can't even find a girl who likes girls on Tinder without having to arrange an hour's transportation and then find she just wants to play with every part of my body like it's a weird sex toy but won't let me touch her. But apparently I didn't stop being this good influence after



virtually cutting contact for three whole years. Maybe it's even worse if I don't actually talk to him, I thought, maybe I'm letting him idolize me. He's a year out of high school and still hasn't decided on a university, works a part-time job. I meet him at the car he got for his birthday three years ago, as per family tradition, remember the time I sold mine to make a year's rent that I squandered in a blue-dark room hating myself, winced, waved.

I'm wearing my leather jacket and my hair's bobbing, sticking out in several but not all directions from the back of my neck. His is cut even shorter than the last time I saw it. It was almost the same exact length as the belt of loose scruff under his neck. Jax - short for Ajax - ogles the Roland Special I was cradling nervously. "I should have thought to bring my small gun. But mine is nothing cool, compared to that. My friend's gonna get a Zenith Z-5RS, though, if you ever want to come over and try it out." I did, I'd even be able to put up with getting to know his friend for it. "What do you even do with a gun like that in the city?" "What do you think, we go out to the dog park and shoot Frisbees like that lady in Nichijou? Nothing, obviously." To be honest, actually getting to shoot these had been the best part of being home, but it was the kind of good that wears out fast and I think I'd been worn out of



it within the first week of sneaking out to the fallow field and lining up full bottles of RC Cola on the rotting fence. I had no interest in hunting, shooting birds and squirrels any more - it felt too much like the casual ways I'd seen people hurt people like me, whereas the way I let out my fantasies of shooting at something bigger in the heat of a moment of thrilling panic felt like, what, shooting at nothing? shooting at something that comes back stronger?

He mostly wanted to talk about the city, about all the things he thought there were to do there - most of which neither of us would have been able to pay for. And there were other things I couldn't do without putting myself through things he wouldn't understand. I felt kinda bad that I couldn't bring back the kinds of adventure stories he wanted, as I tried to remember all the most exotic restaurants I'd been to, the strangest things I had seen on the subway.

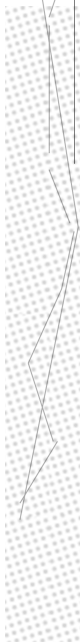
Yet, we had a fun, unsurprising time at the range. It seemed like he had finally caught up to me in terms of accuracy, and took a bunch of phone pics to show mom, beaming. He seemed to get bored fast, too - by the time we were tired out we still had three hours until we had told our parents to expect us home. And he snuck us out when



a minor acquaintance of dad's whose name I didn't even remember started prying for details of my past five years. On the way out he pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Alastair's got his paycheck - he's getting the Zenith on Saturday. You gonna come with me when I go over to try it out? He's super liberal too, you won't have to pretend to be a boy around him."

I crunched the map I was looking at to decide where to drive next between my palms. "Who told you that I was..."

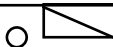
There weren't any physical signs yet - no real ones, I thought. With dad refusing to put hormones on his insurance, I'd carefully planned and waited for my financial situation to stabilize, and at the perfect moment it had imploded. I'd finally saved up a summer's worth of pay at a non-minimum (but still low) wage. I'd finally bit the bullet on going back for grad school and participating in that one prof who I thought vaguely but at least politely fetishized me's research on radical communal lifestyles in the 21st century. I'd finally gotten a prescription, quit my job with the cleaning crew so I wouldn't have to grow boobs and hips in time lapse in front of the proprietors, and settled in to spend the summer quietly growing into





who I was. Then Sophie had moved out. She couldn't deal with the memories of Delilah and her new long-distance girlfriend needed her even more than I did. I couldn't blame her. I didn't. Alone in that doubly haunted, devalued-and-revalued, neglected space, with recent cobwebs choking ancient ones over amber-coloured wood, I dipped into savings I wasn't supposed to touch to pay the full rent for the no-longer-group home while I looked - hopelessly - for somewhere cheaper, convincing Mom and Dad when they called screaming that I would be able to pay for everything in the fall. Then funding for the research project got cut. I stopped renewing my prescription and went off; I wasn't that deluded about what options I had left. I tried sex work a few times but couldn't force myself consistently enough, especially with the dysphoria getting worse. Mai had offered to move me back in with her but she needed a burden even less than me right now. I knew what I had to do, had felt it digging at me like the imp of the perverse since the familiar nightmarishness had caught up with me in the city.

Jax blinked. "Remember you linked me your Tumblr page ages ago? When you were trying to make music?"



No I hadn't - I hadn't even told him it was mine, but I must have just linked him a track via my Tumblr because it was easier than sending the file, without even thinking about it because I didn't post anything unusual on there at the time and he avowedly didn't have any interest in the platform. It had never once come up between us since then. I'd had no idea he had been reading it, which would have been really cute and flattering were it not... how much had he read? How the fuck was I supposed to ask that without sounding like a middle schooler? I didn't even realize this at the time, but holy shit, I posted on there the night I came out to my parents - did he see THAT?! Did he see me having a breakdown and wanting to- fuck, even if he hadn't seen that one time, if he's seen enough to know I was trans he had seen enough to know the kinds of shit I'd been going through those years, hadn't he? And never once said anything. Not a word of support, not an "if you want to talk..." Not even when I started transitioning... For three years. This is what I'm just processing now, as I write this, none of this even occurred to me at the time. At the time I was having a weird panic about whether our parents knew that he knew and they had agreed to pretend otherwise just to fuck with me, whether he had been stalking me to report on me to his friends, whether...



“Ha ha.” I pretended to just be embarrassed. “I actually, literally forgot.”

“I don’t stalk it or anything, I just went back to the link one time I was feeling lonely and wondered what you were up to, and saw... nothing but trans stuff. It’s OK, I’m cool. You always did you.” He turned the key and revved the motor, waving good-bye to dad’s confederate-flag-jacket-patch-wearing friend who popped out the door of the shooting gallery for a smoke just at the moment we pulled out of parking, with the windows down...!!

“You OK?”

“Yeah, just... it’s kind of a shock to find out somebody knows that.” My voice was cold, curt - and as much more so as it had instantly become markedly more feminine. The male voice I’d had to put on these past weeks had been as awkward, almost adolescent or English dub anime voice actor as my female voice had sounded those few months I’d tried internet “voice therapy”.

“Right. But I’m not gonna judge you or anything, so you don’t have to worry about that.”



"Thanks, that really means a lot to me."

"Uh..." his voice trailed off. "I can call you Leona, right? When it's just the two of us?"

My doubts washed away and I only didn't hug him because I'm the most physically awkward person in the world, with no business inhabiting a body of any sort. "Please do."

Did he know they knew? Did he ever talk to Mom? (Mom being the one who always yelled at me about it but I shouldn't focus so much on her, she's not the scary one she's the scared one, she told me dad didn't even want me to come home, told me she talked him into it, wanted me to thank her... but expecting him to talk to dad is too much, expecting any human...) He couldn't have done much, I know, but how much could he have tried? I didn't think about any of that in that moment, although I can't remember what I was thinking about. All these questions, all these trust-issue-ass questions would come to me in a long slow unspooling after what happened next.

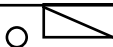
I didn't think about where we were going as he drove me through the flaking woods, in a different direction but still away from home. Just driving in this part



of the country was fun, we would both admit freely, and Jerry Lee Lewis was on. I didn't think there was any more to it until he turned and the wheels were suddenly pulling through not just gravel but thick, damp, and the grey thickened and muddied between thin trunks bundled like reeds on one side. On the other side, a sickly swampy field I'd never seen before. He said, excitedly, innocently, without a hint of the change in mood I was feeling on my side of the car, that he was going to show me something.

I had to remind myself that if he was really less tolerant than he was saying, he wouldn't have let me bring my gun out with me.

He pulled over and screeched the brakes in the ditch when a grey abandoned barn with a half-white painted roof aligned itself with us on the right. I fell out first; my eyes traced a dirtbike track through the weeds to the side door of the barn. Even he was starting to get uncomfortable with the silence, so Jax started filling space with just sorta circuitous carnie hype like "this is the project I've been working on since spring". (Had he mentioned one before? I couldn't remember.) I was expected to help him move two huge beams across the gate - "Davy's idea" - which turned out to be redundant with a spotless



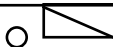
chrome padlock. Jax slid a key out of his pocket and the door swung towards us like an ambush. What was inside felt like one.

Lined up along walls or stacked on the long benches that crossed the barn were huge plastic jugs and other containers of all sizes. Bags of fertilizer piled in one corner. Drain cleaner. Gas. Rock salt. I had noticed the smell before I even entered but assumed it was just some weird plant or pollution (you get more weird smells out here than you'd think); it smelled like piss but sweet; I covered my nose. "This is the trap," Jax announced. He paced along the benches rambling about challenges he had to overcome setting this up and technical did-you-know bullshit for five minutes before he noticed my expression. I guess if I was writing a novel or something I'd try to write some of it out here for verisimilitude. I think I just had that thought because I'm almost tempted to do so just to prove to myself he really did, just to know that I can account for how I feel about it. If he hadn't been like that the reason he felt safe telling me would have been obvious, and despicable. He must not have known that Mom and Dad knew about me - it checks out, they obviously wouldn't talk about it to him - and figured he wouldn't have to explain to me that if I told them, he would tell

them. Actually, does that explain anything on its own? Why would he want to tell me anyway? The obvious reason, for me to work with him, never once even seemed to occur to him as he rambled on. He didn't act like he was keeping anything like this at the back of his mind. When he saw me glaring uncomprehending me from behind three splayed fingers, he first observed "oh. The smell."

It was like a cat bringing you a dead bird.

It makes me wonder - made me wonder, I think it's passing now, if only because my world's changed so much in a single evening since then that I'm instinctively suspending judgement on anything - if my parents were right about us, about more things than I ever imagined they could be right about. Because it was like, and this is just as offensive but more fucked up, the only reason I can imagine why he would show me this is he thinks because we're both living in ways our parents and their people wouldn't approve of, that we've got something in common, that we're kindred spirits, partners in crime. He probably felt that way back when he was just plagiarizing that paper for school, which I heard about right around when I started experimentally going outside in that little



black dress with the purple embroidered spirals along the hem. He's not entirely wrong - I honestly don't know how much this should even bother me. I've done hard drugs - ketamine the hardest - and I've known people who have done a lot more than I have. I yelled at a guy once for kicking a dealer out of a party where everybody was doing coke and Molly - all of them having fun, completely in control of their experience in the long run except the girl I was there with - because it seemed like such blatant classism, the same thing as if you wouldn't deign to talk to the person who picked your fruit. If he read my Tumblr maybe he knew about that. I don't criticize rappers for "glamorizing" dealing any more, though obviously they're in a different situation. (I wouldn't blame whoever Jax picked up "trapping" from. (Maybe Breaking Bad, though... there were three different posters of Heisenberg on the walls.)) Still, it's an insulting conflation, right? It would be if someone made it out loud, but does that mean I should treat it the same way as an unconscious thing?... right it's feelings "should" isn't the point but I'm trying to decide what to write down. Can I write down what even makes me uncomfortable about this? Are the impressions I have of what drugs do to people out here assumptions no better than the assumptions he might have about black men in the "trap", or any of his friends might have about me?



Still he doesn't have to be doing this, and I don't have any idea why he is. I spent most of the time I was there, between listening to him brag about things he hasn't done yet, trying to get a clear sense of why. I got nothing. It was the same as listening to him talk about the city he doesn't know anything about or make any plans to go to. What does he want to do with the money? We're not poor.

And yet I found myself unwittingly acting as the partner in crime he wanted. I held my muscles so tense the whole time to keep from springing and destroying everything in sight, from beating the shit out of him, that I felt them reverting to that spring-loaded state that night in my bed. I could have overpowered him with hardly any struggle if I'd wanted. My few months of hormones hadn't fucked up my muscles - I had never intended to let them. He on the other hand didn't seem to have picked up any gains since I had last seen him. I could have killed him - him with the gun, me unarmed - and he knew this. And I knew one thing he didn't that made his most insulting calculation, as I'd analyzed it, worthless. But what still mattered was what I didn't know. I didn't know who he was anymore. How ruthless the person who had made this place was - and how much that person cared about someone like me. I knew Dad was desperate for any excuse



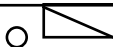
to get rid of me. If I pissed Jax off, there was nothing to stop him from telling them I'd done... anything. He could say I'd shown him this place. Wouldn't matter if it made sense, even if I wasn't me they'd never decide based on anything like that. And I wouldn't even mind risking homelessness except I still had responsibilities to someone other than myself, someone more precious than anyone whose life he might ruin out here... not as if I cared about him ruining people's lives, I'd grown up seeing Dad do it all my life, and it's not like legally or illegally meant shit to me. When he'd opened the door, my honest first thought was that he was blackmailing me. But by the end of our conversation - finally, sternly telling him how stupid this was, almost in tears, and watching his face form, in genuine confusion, the expression it would around "so?" - I realized how much more horrifying the truth was. He genuinely had expected me, the sister who'd broken every rule ever imposed on her, who was after all an anarchist (anarcho-communist, but would he remember the distinction?) so I had to think breaking the law was cool right? - would be enthusiastic about this. But part of him had to know there was a chance I wouldn't. And in that chance, the flipside of knowing he trusted me was knowing he didn't respect me in the slightest. And what reason had I given him to? If we were the same, I had no authority



for him. I had the authority to give him every drug safety tip I knew, and exchange some he'd picked up on his own. He agreed enthusiastically to pass these tips on to buyers (there wouldn't be many, I told myself, with this operation, these kids, there couldn't be many), and nodded skeptically when I estimated the safest time to cut them off. But he'd be better off getting lectured by mom and dad than me - one way or another, they still seemed to be the centre of this Ptolemaic world-sphere we were trapped in even as we orbited its fringes trying to escape.

Speaking of that world, Dad was there at dinner.

He didn't say anything. He and mom had been talking tensely about something but he shut up as soon as Jax and I walked in. Mom glanced at him with increasing frequency, trying to tell if he was just lost in thought or doing that again. We waited for him to eat as if for someone to say grace. At least I did, but Jax just started chowing down immediately. After about a minute of which, and me and mom starting to just poke at our plates, he spoke up, from almost a whisper. "Well, hello? Are we a family here? Does anyone have anything to talk about?" I froze. When we were kids I had always been the one to handle situations like this - to go first, even though there



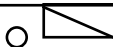
was no real reason to. Now the pressure was doubled. Jax looked at me, then opened his mouth. “Nuh-uh - there’s still food in that. You don’t go.” He waited, and the silence grew louder. “Are you guys playing a prank on me or something? Am I going deaf?” Mom glared at me and I glared back at her, because she knew better than to take his demands at face value like that. Actually, if she did, she would have said something. I mumbled something about how the dirt bike field we drove by on the way to the range, with its blue-green view of the mountains, had its huge piles of building waste levelled. (Jax had already told me about the development plan - suburbanites moving all the way out here, which I had noticed even when Mom had driven me in from the city.) Silence - the simplicity of my question had disarmed him, or he was already exhausted from looking at me. Mom’s hand almost white-knuckled on his wrist, he gave one curt nod, “good shot”, and ignored me for the rest of supper.

He talked about work. About the little organic farm he had been investigating the past week, Mother Goose, which had been growing rapidly over several years on the strength of their marketing that put a nursery rhyme on each product, “because the people who eat food like that are children”. That isn’t even wrong, probably,





but what are you supposed to make of the way he speculates about what they'll do and how they'll be treated by coworkers if the ("stupid", for "senile weirdos") golf retreat opening up down the road bought the land, how he relishes describing the care he took to scrutinize the building process of the new stables destroyed in a storm for breaches of insurance policy, how he would have liked to tell them to give up farming out of mercy to the "sweet" "precious" animals they had left. Again, I'm sure he's not wrong about the building. His line of work is a proud one and one that nobody wants to do, the work of deflating pride; he can do it because he's not a pencil pusher and has done everything in his time, but also clearly gotten tired of it. Everything he would have liked to tell them, he tells us. Everything he would like to tell us, who does he tell? Probably the rich local businessmen he schmoozes and flatters for the company's sake at the same time as he keeping them blind to how much money he's keeping them out of: the Kool-Aid drinkers, the ultimate leitmotif of his derision. He comes back to them at some point, as he always does. The kitschy Kincade paintings on their walls, how effeminate their trust in a Disney-coloured life of peace and happiness to come had made them, as if anyone could even want such a thing. The obnoxious ways they wormed their faith into conversations, tried to turn



every tangent into a sales pitch. The latest pathetic grifter they deferred to as if he was God on Earth, wearing more makeup than a woman. ...Jax should have shown Dad that place, not me. I mean Dad would have killed him, quite possibly literally, but that would be due to an unfortunate inconsistency, or an unnecessary consistency, in his worldview. I mean, there's no way he actually objects to somebody selling their kids real Kool-Aid.

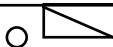
I really wanted to feel like there was something good about being here, so after supper I made sure the stars were out and Skyped Mai. I couldn't go out in the field without my computer losing reception, but I hitched up the curtains in the corners of the window and set the old red-orange lamp to light them from below in a way she'd like, sat next to it and leaned out over the eaves, screen facing out on my lap. I could barely see a soft frond of the milky way gritted with stars like one of those massive movements of ants on a rainforest leaf. It was grey, ghostly. I hoped it would show up on webcam.

Mai didn't answer at first and I hissed silently and wanted to tear my face. But after a minute that I sat frozen, the phone-icon jumped. I didn't see her expression when I swivelled the computer away from me but she



made sounds audible on the mic.

I'm sure everyone's watched stars with a friend who pointed out stuff like 'there's Deneb, there's Altair, there's Vega' but the first thing Mai pointed out was where astronomers thought they had found a new earthlike planet (the exact star wasn't visible to the naked eye, even from here). And another star, according to astrophysicists' calculations, had probably gone supernova by now and the light would reach us in a few hundred years, in which case it would be the brightest visible from Earth since 1054. She asked if I could find my sign yet and I still couldn't, and I still didn't think I needed to believe in astrology, although I had been starting to, sneaking glances at the horoscopes in the newspaper just to give myself a sense that something could happen. She traced Sagittarius (how am I not even a Leo?). I still don't understand how anybody would have seen a shape in that vague scattering of stars. She says it's like a mnemonic: when ancient navigators and people had to look at the stars to tell which way they were going, they wouldn't have been able to tell anything apart unless they looked for shapes even if they weren't there. She says astrology works something like this too.



She uses the shapes that don't exist to show me the star she says she's from.

She does that every time but I get what she's saying about the mnemonic because there's no way I would have been able to guess where it was. That time it had been barely visible from a campsite a mile outside the city, now it was one of the brightest stars in its neighbourhood. It hovered above a mountain on the horizon like a crown jewel. The purple-blue light jumping nervously all over her rounded brown cheeks from the bare bulb dangerously close to her pillow that was supposed to be like the light of a blue giant star. We never feel comfortable looking at the world around us, she says, because it's lit in the sickly yellow of slow decay. Civilizations can't last very long orbiting a blue giant, because it burns out within a few million years, but they're the happiest in the universe, and don't fear going nova.

(Like in the words of a song that I first heard in this house, that I showed her when we started dating, that she posted a cover of a few days after we stopped, her signature pitch-bended bubble synths replacing Bruce Cockburn's cleanly produced guitar, that has since become the most popular song on her Soundcloud:

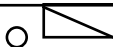


“When the sun goes nova, and the world turns over, I don’t want to be alone, so honey, come on home.”

We never felt like we were ‘home’ together, but I wonder if that was my fault: could I have imagined a ‘home’ that didn’t feel like this one?)

I hadn’t been sure if I ask her for advice - if I wanted her comfort or just the comfort of her presence - but after she started talking about her living situation, I just couldn’t bring myself to. It’s not like she’d expect me to be grateful or something - but still, I couldn’t complain about the one thing she absolutely needed. It looked like she wasn’t going to be able to make rent at the end of the month, after blowing her meager Patreon funds at the hospital. She hadn’t had as many ideas for music recently, anyway, so those were taking longer to recoup. Same situation as I had been in, more or less, a month ago. The difference was, I could live with living with my parents - it wasn’t my first choice, in fact it was my very last but it was a choice. Mai would rather live on the street.

That story’s not mine and doesn’t belong here. I told her about my search for a job in the neighbourhood and since I wasn’t paying anything to live here, if



I made some money I'd send anything she needed. Of course, there was no real work out here. All there was were odd jobs on the farms or around the homes of people rich enough to pay someone they didn't really need, the kinds of people Dad knew, but Dad wasn't introducing me to them any more, the way he had when I had just gotten out of high school, the way he did for my brother (he had stolen some of the meth equipment from one). The fact that I had come crawling back is embarrassment enough to him, and my father is an honest man: even if nobody were ever to find out about what I was, he couldn't go around recommending me as if I was a respectable person.

I wouldn't have brought it up because she was already having one of her guilt episodes, or whatever, to the point of saying she wouldn't take any money even though she lives off Patreon. I hate that I couldn't make that sound like not a different thing. Yeah if you put it that way, Patreon's really good for people who don't feel like they have the right to impose on anyone at all in how they make a living - not even to sell their own art. And maybe she wasn't scared enough. She had been in this situation a few times before and gotten through it thanks to donation posts, staying with friends, last minute negotiations. The real concern, we unspokenly agreed, was if this wasn't



just something that could be gotten through. In the past year she had lost a number of her key supports in Seattle - including me. Jobs were getting harder to find around the neighbourhood even though the economy was recovering. She wouldn't be able to keep using the same escape valves week after week, month after month. At the bottom you fall agonizingly slow.

After I shrunk away from the light and the dark, brushed my teeth, scrolled through Tumblr, liked a string of Mai's posts, put up a small amount to her donations, struggled with a dense Marxist theoretical pdf and gave up after a couple of pages, I didn't sleep. I kept remembering times I'd shaken scary men off her at shows - two times presenting as a man, one presenting as a woman, with a [knife] under my cutoff jean jacket. Another reason I'd convinced myself to hold off on transitioning for so long, until it was too late - the respect I could occasionally command by pretending to be the boyfriend. (Another reason we couldn't stay together - the way I'd get stressed at everything whenever I'd go out with her like that, and she'd think it was something she did, and how, in my own perverse way, I allowed myself to believe her.) As I forced them out of my mind they were reduced to weird kinetic afterimages, still-glowing brands. I kept making move-



ments under my sheets like I was running, or lashing out, or holding, or curling up into a ball against blows.

- The pdf was all about revolution, about class consciousness and how every other desire would be subordinated to it and I was excited but kept asking myself questions when I read it that I knew it wouldn't answer like - what if the people I want to start a revolution for are the people nobody else is going to want to start a revolution for? But then, wouldn't that always be true of the people anybody would be willing to start a revolution for? If she couldn't make enough money to keep her apartment - her, someone who was making the world better in ways I had never dreamed of being able to myself - if she couldn't move enough people to send her \$5, how could she move enough people to pick up guns? Would the people with ordinary jobs and salaries, not making enough to throw at every stranger in need but enough to be satisfied, have to be motivated by the fraction more they could make for themselves or their families or the people like them, instead of by the fraction they could have given away? Was that what 'class consciousness' was supposed to amount to?

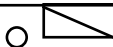
And this was one I liked, because at least it didn't



talk about revolution as some kind of kid's fantasy where you get everything you want all the time, or a "shift in consciousness" like people used to say about 2012 - a magical, dubiously consensual cosmic orgasm. This was when I started thinking all the weird paranoid insecure-sounding stuff from before about my brother. Because the fucked up part of that situation was... well, if I got caught, for one thing... I can't remember what order I thought any of this stuff in. All of it connects in any order, anyway.

I certainly didn't feel any particular order as they arose out of my half-sleeping mind and swum wordlessly in circles before I noticed them. A lyric Mai wrote one time: "I'm a crystal of space-time eternal/but the arrow of time keeps moving through me anyway/cracking me".

But I do remember, yes, I thought of that because I had started thinking what if - instead of taking the trusty mostly-for-Tumblr-likes 'SMASH CAPITAL' baseball bat to the place like I'd been contemplating - what if I did start working with him or something, what if I could make enough money to help Mai that way, but if she wouldn't even accept donations how would she accept that, and why didn't I want to decide yet, what would it mean to force myself to decide in this too-hot bed right here and now?



Even back when I'd last lived here, people always told me I anticipated and accepted worst case scenarios disturbingly fast, that I was quick to give up and adjust - almost as if part of me was eager to have nothing to lose. Well, I'd seen those scenarios actually play out more times than in high school I could have dreamed I would within a few years. I could certainly do with more things to lose. But that didn't mean I was going to waste any more energy on resistance.

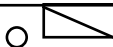
But the fucked up thing about this situation was, even though this train of thought meant I was in fact reacting exactly like Jax had hoped I would, he was so wrong - so perfectly wrong, it was like a mirror image. He thought that just because I wasn't living the way Mom and Dad wanted, I was like him, or like what he wanted to be - maybe because of me, how fucked would that be? - that I was living however I wanted! But this house, my shadow on the floor of that fucking trap house shack, was check-mate in a game I'd been playing blindly since birth. I've never been able to go out places I wanted to, talk to people I wanted to, afford things I wanted to, be seen the way I wanted to. When I was friends with trans and nonbinary people who were unbelievably positive about the bodies they were born with, I specifically personally couldn't re-



late to that, I'd always felt like I was trapped in this one even when, and I'd like to say even if, I didn't understand that in gendered terms. I've always had to calculate things that unlike pounds and grams and bands don't even calculate...

In any case, by the end he hadn't once offered; it seemed he didn't even see me as a partner in crime literally. Maybe it wasn't women's work, or something.

By the time I was crying, silently and feelinglessly and reflexively, I had given up on sleep and could only think of cool air to dry the hot water on my cheeks. I stumbled over to the window, and looked up to the stars, their blueness and brightness spiralling closer through my bleary vision, as I tried to remember which ones had names. Mai says praying has nothing to do with the future, or miracles, it's another way of... seeing yourself in time like a constellation. Charting your way. I didn't care about that. I could care about that, some day. I wanted to be as free as my brother, even if I wouldn't allow myself to waste it. I wanted to act, just for a second, like the kindness of the stars could blow everything away. Like some of the people Dad's fucked over who want to kill me because they think they'll get their dignified jobs back in heaven.



I wanted permission.

How did she do this again?

Close your eyes... try to see the stars behind them... if they change size that's OK... wait until they don't have a size any more... and you aren't any distance from them either... or any time. Be attentive to any change that's happening... any movement... that's still happening... that doesn't even wait for time to happen...

My eyes flew open.

Something had jolted me at this passage.

Looking up between Betelgeuse and Sirius (I could suddenly remember them!), a twinkling tricoloured light - red, yellow, green - was getting bigger and bigger and rapidly moving. I blinked. No, it had barely moved in a few seconds - why did I get that sense of speed? - it wasn't just twinkling, it was spinning, the red and yellow and green points of light reappearing regularly at alternating points around it, fast. I had the intuition of something like a baseball flying towards me, spinning as it fell in a

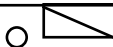


huge arc - and as I watched it, slowly, this intuition bore out.

I turned my computer back on and frantically put a call through to Mai, my fingers shaking. She wasn't online. So I balanced the laptop in the windowsill, set the webcam running.

My brother complains that I didn't get him up to see, or Mom and Dad. But before we found out what it was, there's no way he, let alone Mom or Dad, would have wanted to be shaken out of bed by a twenty-two year-old to see a random light in the sky purported as a UFO. Half of me was counting the seconds until I figured out what normal thing it was and half of me thought, if it was something special I had called down, a sign, inviting anyone else to see (except maybe Mai) would break the spell.

By the time the backs of my eyes were starting to hurt and I was definitely fully awake, it was bigger than any star, or airplane, or anything twinkling I had ever seen in the night sky. Now I was starting to get worried, starting to think through scenarios of horrible irony. What if this was some terrorist thing - I literally never worried about terrorists - some EMP or dirty bomb or world-ending technology we'd never heard of? Some kind of aster-



oid or comet? Everyone wanted the world to end some nights, but I never had those nights after talking to Mai - this had been the exact opposite, a night I couldn't accept the world ending, a night I felt crushed under the reasons I had to go on. Of everyone's wish for it all to end, why would Something have picked up mine? How could it, without checking in with Mai, or Sophie, or Delilah's unfathomable and immovable dead will...! But there was no denying any more. Neither the whistling nor the buzzing were normal even for weird night noises.

Over the trees, their tops beginning to fade, it had entered my sign, the size of the moon, and too bright to look at straight.

I closed my eyes, resigning myself to waking up from the dream.

I heard a dirty, anticlimactic thud.

I held my eyes closed until my body started to distract me. Without even looking at the window, I turned to my bed, tore off my PJs, and pulled the one dress I had brought home over my shoulders. If I was going to encounter... something, I wasn't going to give them any wrong ideas.



I was just running towards where I had seen it through the fields until I found something strange. (By that time I would start wondering again if I had imagined it all - or how else I would be able to think of it if there was nothing out here.) Something like wax was seeping between the doubled-over stalks of last year's dead corn. Neon red, green, blue and yellow phosphoresced faintly, swirling together in oil-on-pavement patterns. At first I thought it was just moving naturally. Then I saw it pull back, inch forward again. I bent down and watched it - you'd think it would stop but, as my shadow fell across it, it began to seethe and jump like boiling water, racing up the broken stalks and the few live grasses leaning on them. I jumped back. In some places, it had risen a foot off the ground, and was waving in the air.

As I backed away, it stopped dead.

I could hear another unfamiliar noise. Like something Mai would make on a synthesizer, except if she could she would have done it already. A kind of harmonic groan, a polyphonic creaking. The ordinary sounds of the night had gone, not completely, but politely quiet.

Slowly, it started to advance again, but this time it seemed to be losing energy. (There were also these huge



rounded glassy shards sticking out of the ground further away, the moonlight refracting through them in turquoise polygons, but they didn't interest me at that moment.) It would advance and then stop, then advance for a shorter time, then stop for a longer one. I had a sense I might not have a chance to look at it for much longer, so I got closer again. As it slowed, the noise rose, both in volume and in pitch, which swept and swooped like a wolf howl.

A dragonfly alit on a stiff blade of grass that had been coated up to the first node. The stuff - lemon-yellow - shot up the blade and covered the dragonfly in an infinitesimally thin coating. I held my breath. Then it receded, as fast as it had advanced. The dragonfly spasmed its wings twice - then flew off as if nothing had happened. Looking out across the field, I could see it catching and releasing more bugs as it moved.

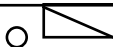
I wasn't even sure it was living, but there was - was there? I'm not just projecting this back in hindsight, am I? - something strangely pathetic about it, something moving in the way it moved. It was absolutely, desperately out of place here - what I hadn't been able to tell until now was, in the terms of being out of place that I knew, whether it was desperate to be left alone or shown around. The



more I watched it interact with different, totally unrelated creatures, even a squirrel - while this last one it didn't cover completely, it reached out and touched its paw and something similar seemed to happen - the more it seemed harmless, and maybe it's thanks to Mai I don't have the kind of reflexive fear of weird things most people have. Mai's universe (I won't say imagined) - the universe as she lives in it - days' worth more she's told me on impulse than she's ever written up for liner notes or Patreon rewards - is filled with harmless, gentle weird things, a million words for gentleness, a million things that only exist in one place and yearn for you to learn the word for them. If our normal world is so cruel and unpredictable and monstrous, why would things that aren't like it be the same? Of course that's a kind of naive way to think about the unknown - and I still couldn't know for sure this wasn't of "our world", however abnormal. But when I stretched my shaking hand out I was narrating it to myself in terms of a kind of honour - I couldn't possibly tell Mai about what had happened and not tell her what this felt like.

It stung.

When the brief staticky jolt ended I thought it had pulled away from me, but I was still touching it. And



I didn't lift my hand. I didn't want to, but - my arm felt weird - it didn't seem to be shifting with my shoulders as they rocked back and forth - I tried moving it, found I couldn't move my shoulders either. I had seen this with some of the larger insects, the squirrel - they froze for a second, then - release. It had already been a lot longer. I was suddenly extremely aware of the half-hallucinatory outer-inner space linking my throat, the inside of my head, the backs of my eyes, the outside of my mind. My consciousness swam, refracted along its soap-bubble barrier.

A jolt knocked me back inwards. My moving light had encountered a shadow. I was not alone in the womb.

The shadow moved along the edges of me, roughly and purposively. My inner self was almost too dizzy to process it - what inner self - which walls were spinning? One time it literally blocked my sight - it was not black, it was all the colours of the pool and more, but it was opaque and utterly without glow - and in the silence that followed, I had the sense it had been blocking, testing my senses one by one. When I looked back down the stuff had crept most of the way up my arm. I couldn't move. I couldn't grit my teeth, or try to breathe. I could - barely - still remember that a bug's nervous processes, like its





body and lifespan, are so much smaller and so much faster. The 'catch-and-release' pattern I had observed would of course take longer with a human. Wait, how did I know this?

One instant I was thinking this the other I was thinking things that bore no relation, however distorted, to anything I had ever experienced before, to anything that had ever happened to me on a trip, things that literally weren't outputs of the same inputs. My eyelids stretched over me like huge cave-walls flashing with alert lights. It pounced on me, pursued me - but the first recognizable experience I could make out of it was fear. A chord of fear, several kinds of fear at once, all absolute. I could even recognize them in - some of the incomprehensible flashes, I discovered, had somehow left memories.

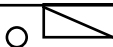
Who... are you?

Then it released.

As if my thought had alerted it.

As if my thought had offended it.

I stared as if the whole thing was going to fade



away, the thing in front of me and then the memory, the moment that had brought me here, maybe even my hope - as if I had woken myself up from a dream.

I didn't dare breathe.

I was looking down at my arms again. I was covered in multicoloured slick racing like I had never seen it move before. It didn't retreat all at once. It clung, hesitated. When it began to move all at once, its movement was regular, and agonizingly slow. I let it go. I watched. I was starting to feel this was for the best. This wouldn't be scary, I wouldn't keep second guessing whether I should have come out or got this close; it would take shape in front of me, reveal itself as a...

I waited to find out as the pool puddled before me. As its movements settled between the grasses. As the tips began to show through uncoloured again.

Wait, this can't just end like this - can it?

I stared, waiting for something to happen. If it disappeared, if I woke up, that would be more tolerable - the disappointment would be small, ordinary, numb. The substance still reached out and touched things but



wouldn't even cover them. Was it... dying? Was it a thing that could live or die? What would this mean about my wish? Had I wanted this? What had I done? What had I not done? Was this a nightmare? What would Mai think? How would I make it through the day the week the month the years and years of nothing like this ever happening again...

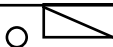
Already almost in tears, I dropped to my knees and touched it.

I left my finger there - cold, subtly tingly, like the surface was still moving at some scale I couldn't see but would normally feel - and started to move it in a circle before it moved, reached partway up my finger, hesitated. I didn't feel much of anything, but kept imagining these flashes of light, like some kind of code. I thought as hard as I could at it about the dilemma I was in, in hopes it could hear. I plunged my arms in, covered myself.

- Stop.

I did.

You understand?



I didn't, but... I did, enough to answer. There was... a surface I could float along and feel things inside of me. I nodded.

I can't speak your language. I can't explain myself without letting myself in. I can't do that - if I let myself in you will know all of me and I will know all of you.

They were dying. They didn't let that one across deliberately but I could tell.

I don't know you. You don't know me and you don't know what you're getting into. You don't know what I am, I do this and am hated for it by something so big it would swallow everything you've ever known in a second -

I don't want this to be how a new species gets to know me. Know us - what we are. It'd be like the enemy would be right. I know... we've done worse things in this war. And I know they're wrong anyway, and we do what we do because we have to, but... Meteorology wouldn't accept that.

I'm reconstructing here. Half of these words wouldn't appear as words until we had shared a brain for a while, but in that moment it struck as an intensity. An



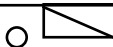


intensity that more than anything else, heightened my sense of kinship with whatever had landed - insofar as it resonated with what I had been thinking about when I had seen her fall. Not Providence. In Meteorology, there is absolutely no Providence. I have never known (I'm speaking from the present now, knowing now what Meteorology is) a religion, a belief system period, so absolutely opposed to the concept of miracles. A miracle in Meteorology would be something not unlike an absolute evil. Not God, either. I had been praying without any hope of a God, praying because what... I felt like I deserved it? I felt something like this was right? Right. Right in the way only a God could be right. Right in the way I had no reason, no right to believe existed in this world. Hope. Faith. And what faith demands in turn - the intensity of commandment.

Come in, I thought, as clearly as I possibly could. Whoever you are. Whatever you are. I'll accept everything. I'll accept everything you are.

There was a silence. - At least I had been recognized.

And at last I started to feel suspicious. I started to wonder whether this was really a demon, like my mom read about all the time even though she wasn't really reli-



gious. To wonder if this would end with me in a lab, or a hospital bed delirious, if it would just die anyway. Would it get me and Mai and everyone... 'swallowed'? I started to wonder if every nuance and twist and turn had been some kind of ploy. I started to remember all the times I had been naïve, and all the times everyone I grew up with would have said I was naïve, and yet I had sheltered friends who had been through worse, in a culture where everyone was always dying on each other's doorsteps...

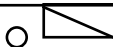
Shit, I thought. I'm in the position of power here, aren't I. I should at least let you know before you know 'everything' about me, there's some fucked up stuff in here, all right?....

And - feeling something of that across my surface, I couldn't tell how much - knowing that I wasn't expecting a miracle, or cowed by mystery - at last they came.

They came in such volume that I couldn't help but use words to start to map their waves and folds. I had to revise I don't know how many times. It came easier now that I realized there was a 'self' threaded through them. Once I realized there was a 'world', perceptions not organized in any of the senses I knew. I could make analogies though - the thing that rippled and flowed around



the self was some kind of liquid, if not water. There were things the self recognized as like itself, there were signs and signifiers in profusion that seemed to dwarf even my own, although I was sure I was too dazed to compare. The beautiful scattered things only detectable by one of seven senses that occupied a disproportionate amount of abstract thought were stars. (I was startled by how like the stars the things that grew in the great [foggy?] archipelagos were.). The event whose presence fell on either side of it, establishing 'time' as 'before' and 'after', was leaving the planet. There was pain. It was not the same as human pain, but it was pain. There were things I felt pain while feeling. Pain and fear and rage were the first emotions my neurons mirrored, accurate or not. Experiences 'after' leaving the planet were more associated with these. Other things that were like and not like it/ me cast huge shadows. What this meant was enormously complex and I would repeat it several times feeling it clarified and then not understanding again. WAR. When the word came to me it spread across the whole network like a crack in ice. Like lightning across the sky casting the most recent memories in huge silhouette flash-FLASH-crescent oval-dim-BURST crescent-crescent-flash-crescent-crescent-three-times-encrypted the ones I would NEVER decrypt rhythms together with NEVER chase trench fay



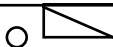
argue passionately(?) over the use of weirs NEVER sneak into craft and huddle together feeling each other go cold NEVER lose another piece of myself gain another piece of myself see it flashed back to me in a new encryption NEVER those pieces still with me never give them back never give them away never write over them pieces marked off as *not-me* PRECIOUS GIFT at my interpretation it lashes out they lash out try to return to nothing enclose on itself I... apologize? and more unfolds, so much more, words starting to form in my language that aren't mine...

I think I returned to my body at the moment that both of us thought of it - wondered what was outside our eyes, how much time had elapsed. The colours fell off me in rivulets, in drops scattering to the ground. (That wasn't how I'd seen it leave the animals.) The shadow had not lifted from my mind. On the ground they were barely moving, the colours gone thin and translucent. Their body was dying. It had been on the verge of death from the moment I had seen it, virtually all functions abandoned except a remarkably plastic nervous system, a nervous system capable of sending complex signals or almost copying itself into mine, running on reserve energy. The bodies I now knew the shape of by senses I still didn't quite have words for were no more like this abject mess than a hu-



man body was like the blob of crushed flesh and shattered bones it would be reduced to if dropped from the Empire State Building, or from orbit. Not that that was what they remembered happening. Despite burning up (in all those strange colours), despite breaking off its outer scales, the space module had slowed itself in midair (process UTTERLY incomprehensible) and landed safely. If they had been crushed by the module, they would have died instantly. But something was wrong about the atmosphere here - even though they had corrected their out-of-control trajectory towards Earth because it had the chemical signature closest to home.

I ran to the side of the house, where we had a rain-water barrel. The alien could barely move into it anymore; I had to (with permission) stick my hand in and slosh it towards the rim (when I did I found it would thicken slightly around my hand and I could drag it). Once I brushed some kind of fluttering, branching tract. With the barrel on my shoulder, trying not to think about them or listen to them thinking, I headed towards the car. I could feel the difference between our air and whatever they were used to (when they weren't underwater - and that also seemed to be an important part of their life cycle), but that didn't tell me anything. I tried to focus on the periodic table - hoping



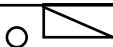
at least they had the same atomic model as we did. They didn't "breathe" per se, but they needed the atmosphere to retain their shape among other functions. When I thought 'air', I tried to think 'seven electrons - eight electrons - seventeen - six-eight-six'. The first few times I thought the numbers they didn't go through because I was just picturing the symbols. The mental translation continued even as I set down the barrel on the porch and dashed in and out for mom's car keys. Nothing was being transmitted by contact or proximity; whatever it meant, they were inside my head.

We drove together through the kind of blackness that could drop instantaneously over this part of the country faster than seemed possible. Occasionally a curved tail of distant streetlights would hint at a horizon. There didn't seem to be much in the way of horizons in their memories - was that being overconfident in my interpretation? - Another word sprang to mind indicating the ragged edges of crescent rifts (radiating darkness, how they seemed to experience it, though was this a total gap in qualia or just a poetic flourish?) in which stars would sometimes appear, as rarely as a perfect snowfall - and it felt like we had had the first real exchange of a conversation - one neither of us were sure we wanted to have.



I hoped my passenger wouldn't feel my shame and frustration as I stumbled out the car door and confirmed the existence of that place, dark and stupid as another cow in the night. I was starting to inadvertently think of them as 'she' for some reason but maybe that was just because I wanted to, and I checked myself. Some of the first - and more abstract - radicals I encountered at university would have said any human's performance of gender would be incomprehensible to an alien, that it's cissexist to act as if gender makes more sense if you do it the way you're supposed to, and I guess that's true but I felt like I ought to apologize for being... the most confusing human that could have picked them up.

My priority was to make a gas they could "breathe" - the word they wanted to use was more like "drink", but you breathed air to me, and for once I didn't want to worry about the difference, especially since there was also a fluid they would start to do badly if they went without. I didn't have to worry about yet, they had stored what had been in the spacecraft in their body, and there wasn't (at a glance) enough liquid of any kind or the right ingredients to mix it in the lab. The lifeform was indifferent to the baseline composition of the atmosphere (here, nitrogen; there, hydrogen) but needed clouds of a few specific chemicals:



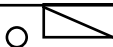
ammonia, which was right there; methane (which I had grabbed from my dad's heater, but would have to evaporate into a gas); and, the odd one out from what Mai had told me about gas giant atmospheres (there was no way I had remembered what Mai had told me about gas giant atmospheres, apparently my passenger had fished out the memory and it had stuck) hydrogen fluoride. Which was the real stroke of luck - Jax was using Freon, and Freon (where had I even learned this? some overheard conversation of dad's, about chemical policy relevant to his work, that I couldn't have been conscious of) was made from hydrogen fluoride, which I could decompose it into with some of the heaters here. I half-hoped the changes in my consciousness would have dug up some unconscious skill at handling all this shit, keeping the tank balanced on the heater while holding another empty tank over the opening without the whole setup slipping, or blowing noxious fumes into my face, but that was just plain physical struggle and improvisation. There were so many ways this could go wrong. Hell, if I blew myself up, or attracted the attention of the police somehow, there wouldn't even be any way anyone would know I had been doing it to save a life that would be long dead in the rain barrel by the time... those weren't the kinds of thoughts to be having with a guest in your head. She- they- didn't seem to be



responding as much as they had been, either they had figured out how to better compartmentalize our minds or were just letting me think.

When I had filled a propane tank with my mixture and confirmed the consistency, I pulled some of the dark sheets down from one of the windows and went into the bathroom, caulking them across the top of the shower stall, so as to make a reasonably sized completely isolated space I could see into. The sheets also attached to all the screens making them harder to pull apart. I left a gap at one corner just big enough for me to lift the tank, nozzle pointed down, and start dispersing the gas, and blowing more in once I had. There was grit, like driveway rock, at the bottom, somehow. Not that a being with no concept of Earth cleanliness would care - being stuck in such a tiny space, on the other hand... As I poured the last of their body into the gap, a rivulet of yellow and pink ran down my shoulder and arm from my ear, slipping off my hand. I couldn't think of half the things I had been half-conscious of a moment before. The voice, the shadow, was gone.

Light flashed across my back and I started. It was already disappearing from the window. I froze. I had almost convinced myself it had just been a random car on



the highway and I didn't need to really hide when the door creaked.

"Hey, we don't have any yet, didn't I tell you?" ...
hey, are you in there?"

I plugged the hole immediately and scrambled out of the washroom, kicking the bunsen burner over behind me. I shut the door hilariously suspiciously behind me and came immediately face to face with my brother, looking probably manic.

"Is that our rainbarrel? What the fuck -"

"Don't touch it!"

"What are you even doing here, did you just wanna smoke up? Are you actually as mentally ill as Dad says? Or is it just... if you wanna be a goody-two-shoes asshole just call the cops like a normal person, don't come in here and smash my shit up personally like a bitchass wannabe cop. Like, snitching would actually be the more honest route, than whatever this is." He sucked in air. "I showed you my secret, I guess I shouldn't have thought you would understand, but -"





"I don't understand. And just because I had secrets, doesn't mean I would get whatever this is, you know that... But we've trusted each other with secrets for a longer time than that, haven't we? I'm didn't even come here to mess this place up, but if you just wait, I'm almost finished, I'll have a secret to show you. One that you need to be way more careful than this stupid one."

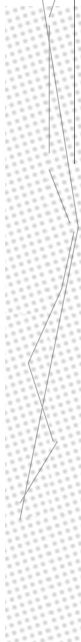
This was almost unconscionably stupid, looking back on it, and I can only hope it's the only decision like this I'll make again. Nothing about what this place told me about his character... his scripted little rant about snitching gave me no concrete reason to believe he wouldn't tell the cops the second they offered him something he liked. Other things, maybe, told me that; things I didn't want to readjust, even though I wasn't sure I even remembered them properly. I wondered if he'd have to touch the sludge to be convinced that it wasn't just... paint or something I mixed up for a practical joke. But as I poured the rainbow sludge slowly through the gap in the , it didn't pool as naturally as it had at the bottom of the barrel; it flailed and clung to the panes, but started hardening mid-air, like some kind of coral, and spread, curling forwards and backwards on itself with the fronds of vapour. I guess it wasn't as shocking to me - I'd 'seen' the aliens in my new



memories, after all - because I found myself watching Jax half the time. “Whoa, sis, what the fuck is that? Holy shit -“ he recoiled, leaned closer, recoiled.

It had spread out - or rather, sucked itself together - in four directions; up, down, left, right. It reminded me of a Celtic cross I'd once worn on a shirt, except where the tendrils of the Celtic cross looped around and closed at the ends, this one had come undone, frayed into about two dozen waving fronds at the end of each bundle. Each frond was tipped with what looked like a kind of suction cup; but they all knotted together ornately, first in each “arm”, then in a spreading net like a dreamcatcher in the middle. The many colours of the protoplasm had resolved themselves into one or two key colours per strand, which were coordinated in eye-popping rainbows; on the other hand, they were still blended in the two thin semicircular wings that spread behind it, like the surface of soap bubbles - as translucent and barely thicker. The wings were anchored in the same thick blue-purple central ring, with faint lights inching around it, where the dreamcatcher-strands met.

I instantly recognized the appearance of their body, their species' body, but I don't think I could have

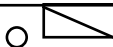




pictured it by myself before seeing it like this. The recognition and the novelty cooperated in taking my breath away.

I replaced it with a deep inhale and put both hands on his spasming shoulders. “They landed in the back field.” “They?” “Oh yeah, what are we gonna do about the ship pieces? ...hey, do you wanna help me clean those up? I wouldn’t trust Mom or Dad with a hint of what happened here...” “Hold up, it came in a ship? Is that a figure of speech? Is that thing safe?” “We’re also gonna need to make them food within twenty-four hours or they’ll die. Does your friend know where to get lots of Freon?” “Dad probably does...”

I lay back and thought. This had to be some kind of destiny. I wanted to be the kind of person who could simply rejoice and even take pride in a sign of Providence, the way old religious ladies around here do when they get a surprise payout from an inheritance or recover from a chronic disease. Or the kind of person who, like in the Bible, ran away until the angel caught up with them, had to bargain, made it as clear as they possibly could that they yes they were the only ones who could serve and what the conditions were, that even if it would be a tragedy it



wasn't a trick. Someone who would get the courtesy of a 'fear not'. - They're trying to tell me not to fear, right now. Thank you. Do you understand what an angel is? Maybe someday you'll understand the language well enough to fill in your own language around these lines. Your joy is... I'll leave it for you to write down. I shouldn't even have put joy. Although it is that. Even deeper and wilder than mine, even suspended in a terror and urgency even louder than mine. How, across the galaxies from what sound like completely different evolutionary origins, can it still be that? ...thank you. If it's not too much to ask, I just want to feel like it's mine for a second, because there's this thing about it, it feels like how I would feel if I was someone like... Mai, who was certain all along that destiny was there, and that it was uncertainty. You feel that way too, huh. I cannot wait for you to meet her! She can't wait and she doesn't even know it yet!!!

Mai never saw anything in my stars like this, though, huh, guess that means the astrology must be just about bunk... But I'm not ready to start thinking about religion again yet. I preferred the weird intimacy of that night in the lab - an intimacy between me and two beings who were, in different ways, about as close as it was possible to my innermost self and complete strangers. I guess

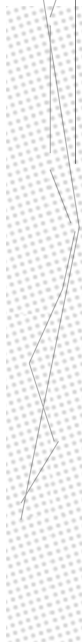


I had been in too many situations like this before. God must have chosen me for that too.





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VCCNM2VM
MPECEN02
GILNEBV0
COMWODO
B1202
EVBVID0
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23E
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I120W
0012
VGI000
W0000
D0G0VE
E1
T0B0VE
M101
IWCIDID0
LEMB0V
E102W0D
2ED DO
WE EGIL
VDIBI2CI
10W
COM2ECIE
0WEL
211
D0G0V
I120W
T0B0W



Name: morgan

Sex: male

Occupation: keeper of a with-
ered bracing

neurodivergence: huskshedder.
under care of sister leaeth of
the sixth gate

Likes: warm neosoil

Dislikes: SunNet shadowbans

Blood type: a-



by: rumour hell



‘But there’s not much time. There will have to be other sanctuaries as well protected as the Gardens of the Queen.’

The Epsilon threading is recovered from a crush dreaming, unspun while coastered out. This sojourn will make its way to Ceriel only after the light fleets away. The gardencity has held secrets from ancient bud. They blossom in petal dance to the eyes of those who stare not at the mist but at the neo-soil below. Ponder their footwork. Careful as they toe across chalk shadows. Etched spectres of those bleachnuked long before into this ghosthood. This is what is meant. In that lost heartbeat belched up from loam there will always be a pattern. Strung through the limbs that push and pull. It is for the desperate, the drowned in ichor, to try to see through the black looop. To make out the sky past the surface which



2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20W
WPECEN02
G1NEBB0
COMWOD0
B1202
E00AID0
N1BICE2
23E
202BEND1
1B20W
0012
0G1000
W0000
D0G00E
E1
T0B00E
M101
1WCIDID0
1E000
E102W0D
2E1 D0
W0 E11
0D1B12C1
100
COM2EC1E
0W01
211
D0G00
1B20W
T0B00

no light ever breaks through. Those who stare at earth ex-
hume it instead.





I plead for the pages to save me. I see you through tears, Cerviel, you who bore with devotion the strength of [white static] now never to vanish against it, but to be used. In the cascade, re-written. I know now that your veins are parched, dusted, scaled over; that Lethe's absence will bring memories back. You're confused. This corrosion causes that. All I can do is watch.

I know if you hear me you can't talk back. Mother told me prayers were like that, things that just fly away. But from where I am I can see the light below, beneath the fluxfoam coriolis. I was doing it wrong, praying the wrong way. I'm bathed in the glow of it now.

Screenscrying in to see you now, at the heart of all things.

I can't tell you too much about the monads whose souls glitter in the shroud like undying stars. The thing with eyes of fire knows most, as always. There are three. One is tainted, promised to the feedback of their nest. The next is cloven, seeking solace from their divide. The third is never alone, tuned like a puppet, strung out by hologram dregs. Each seek to find you; to each you mean something else.

The interface here is ancient, a relic of the first Ebb, I think, that first upstream ripple that churned through our planars like a worm gnawing through fruit. I won't be able to see you much longer. And I am kept here, so far away from you.



My tears are still flowing, in the cold a slow burn down my cheeks. It would mean it all to me, if I knew you could listen. (I wish you would listen, I know you should listen.) The ice is black as ever but one day, maybe, I will see myself in [white static] See what I look like from outside, behind the face that steals into me, for all these seasons spooling 'cross my wetware, the me that is not the one everyone else sees.

transmission archived in planarsea XE3510 ("Caesarea"), recorded on tomb//warding world "Tychicus"

changelog



Synopsis

several inhabitants in this digital, how could our affections
still travel between the thousand strands of data between us

ENCIGISI
TT
2
SVN
CIVS
BBV
COMMODO
BISOS
EVALID
DIVICES2
SEE
IBSN
ONIS
WIGON
WACNV
DOGOVE
EL
GABOVE
MI MI
INCIDIDN
LEWOB
EINSMOD
SED DO
WE EGII'
WDIIBICI
INB
CONSECIE
WMEI'
ZII
DOGOV
IBSN
GOVEN





2'
LWCIGI2I
AET
TVCN2
VCCNM2VM
WPECENW2
GTLNBBV
COMMOD0
B12N2
EVALIDW'
PTIBICE2
23E
202FENDI
1B2NM
0N12
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cw: psychic interference, paranoia

(ε)

PSYCHE HALO

Morgan wakes up under his canopy. It looks a little ragged, shadows on the leaf curls. The sun has moved.

It's hard for him to keep track. He's lost access to SunNet, and it was sheer luck that the Sun's been so nice to him for so long. It doesn't need to be.

Deep down he doesn't really believe the rumours that the Elites control the sun. It's sinister enough that they control the news of its movements. Some part of him that sees them as parasites thinks of it as weaponized astrology. His Psyche Oracle tells him that's paranoia, but she looks like she's doing better than him, so she'd be in on it too.

WOULD IT KILL YOU TO GET THE THINGS I NEED? (ε)



His lines run so easily to think of it all. He has to think of her as helpful just to stay sane. He wonders if she'd give up some info if asked. That should fit in with Neutral Lotus philosophy. Who really cares if he has more info than he technically should?

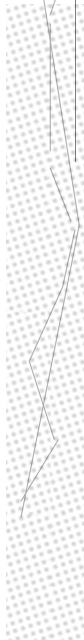
He needs to get it together for his flora. He starts moving to where the veins run. Last night he fell asleep in one of the outer layers of his growth. His growth that runs fast into the whole forest, where sometimes he sees nice things, like stars. He fell asleep, looking at the stars, as they danced through the holograph mists of the canopy.

Smelled the mutate orchids that gave the gardencity its name. They smell tangy, fluffy like clouds.

The motes dance through him, teleporting past his nose. The Skein of his veins, but more his psyche than his body.

He always shakes this off after a while, thinking it feels too weird. Then he tries to know what to do. He hasn't seen his Psyche Oracle in too long, so he's fuzzy.

Static, like electricity, his psyche halo. He doesn't feel it, sometimes. Sometimes he wakes up, wearing it somewhere else, somewhere that looks unfun.





He's learned how to shut it down by thinking at it. Right now it feels nice, like honey, the ancient kind, held by the thick roots of the world.

A leaf curls near him. It lands over his hand, covering fist. It looks ragged, torn in gouges.

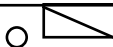
Something out there is hurting it. Maybe its the Sun, he thinks. It could be the Sun all along and we'd never know. Maybe SunNet tells you where it isn't.

Maybe it's all a hallucination, somehow.

Either way he needs to focus on this. The nutrients won't flow into his Tender by themselves. He needs to draw them near somehow.

Drawings, where it all folds in on him. The whole Skein of everything collapsing between That spaces.

That's when he sees the waver in space.



THE ALT

The shimmer has a shape. He doesn't see it in sight, his psyche, or what controls it, not holding it long enough. What he remembers is a shape behind things, that flits through the spaces of the hues and pheromones.

Shows itself to be loved, vanishes again, something beckoning that doesn't need to know how.

He thinks he sees a tail, but it could be a tendril. A shadow slipping through leaves, undersides, blurring past clover.

Whatever it is, he wants it. Wants it as it slips behind the faintness of the things he only sees through the gossamer lids of his Skein eyes. Past the mush. The mush is just glass, something the flora has to make it through. And he thinks he loses too much to know it, just the trying of it.

The Alt is nothing, and it always feels good to think of.

The shimmer flickers to outside of his periphery. And his eyes want to swivel to the bursts there, but instead he holds them on where he last saw it static.

It's just space, and nothing matters of it now. This is still his flora, still darkened, but still vivid. Neonie orchid





pinks, faded teals, the white of ghosts and snow. Still him, right here, even with the rot.

He grasps for it anyway, waiting for his hand to pass through it. Just a memory now of something that might never have been there. His arms are slender, hands thin-wristed, veins coiling over bone under his skin.

He feels the spaces between the flora. No, not just the flora. Orcha Mutate itself, the whole seminal seed scattered. Winged and carried through until the whole city was a forest. Until the whole forest was just an idea.

Never sure if its founding was a story, or if it was a flow. He never saw it grow. Maybe it began as branches, curling out of and into earth, a bracken tangle like veins. Maybe it came through the air, pheromones first, drawing life near, fragrance and lust.

He can't remember his birth moment. He can only remember growing, slow like flora. Growing and not really knowing it until his Tender weakened, and it was time for him to take care of it.

He wishes he had seed sisters, just for the knowing of what it was like for them. As a boy he just wants to press in, lose



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himself in the verdance, and maybe sleep forever.

As he watches, frost creeps over his arm. Scaling in tiny
wraithlike diamonds, and hardening just past the bone of
his elbow.





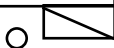
HAPTIC COLLAPSE

The first thing he knows is pain. It's not the frost over his skin, though that hurts as he moves it, digs in and cuts. It's something deeper. The Frost is a taint, he knows from the start, and it works how taints work. It seeps in, finds the spaces, cuts them up. Everything blackens in death.

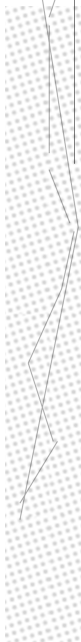
Everything becomes the cut up sky, the blackness through. When the blackness makes it through the verdance it's only a chill, nothing to fret over, if he's sweater wrapped. This is different. This has found his blood, thickening and warping it.

The pain blurs together in his psyche. The blur is the haze of want and need unfulfilled, where they venn like hues and smells and feeling. He knows he can't understand it. There's a thousand angles and they all cut, daggers carving paths to find the root of him. That root is bone fear, and it makes him afraid, because if those are the roots of his Tender, than it's all over. The haptics will all collapse into each other, touch by touch. Until the fear is laced through the Skein, the vibrations and pheromones. And everything that's ever existed will be afraid.

He turns, moves back the way he came, nothing different



except his arm is heavier. And his heart, if he has one, if there's anything real that pulses at the core of him. Something that shouldn't be measured as thought. His heart is heavier too.





THE BLACK HOLE OF THE SUN

He needs a boost to draw it out. He needs life, probably. At least one, maybe one far away from here. Undergrowth is hellish if it sneaks on you.

It sneaks crimson, but sometimes it's in the darkening of the leaves, sometimes in the paling of them. Sometimes he thinks it's the movements he's not making. A frequency wire cross clings to the underleaves that he never sees. Spores everywhere. A death cycle that's been warping everything in places he never notices.

Something that he's floated over, not knowing the hidden wrongness. Everything that wants to vanish when you look at it, not give your percepts a way to sense it together. Not caring.

Not seeing vanishment because it doesn't need you to see.

Who can be sure of sight? When it all blurs, the pheromones, the thought pulses through static and chemistry? And everything bloodens if you get too scared.

Who can be sure of anything, except the haze it becomes when you think about it? Think with strength, or wisdom,

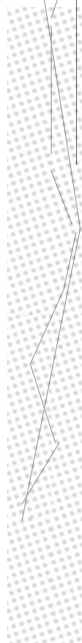


and all you'll know is you're weak, and never wise enough.

When Morgan feels like this he wishes he could lie on the grass and never wake. Maybe no one would even bother him. It hurts to think of his Tender, though. It doesn't deserve to go ragged, even if it could all be a haze. Blur and barrier, what looks permeable and what is always shut.

Behind the doors always shut hides the Black Hole of the Sun. You only see it if you look. It's the shadow behind the veil you see sometimes, darkening the canopy for reasons you never know.

You can never know it. The fires it burns it keeps hidden. Far from you, behind shadows you can't see and brush too thick to pass.





GENEWEAVES

The brush gloops him, the grass blades and branches as he moves through them. Coats the flora petals he moves through. It doesn't slow him, but it sticks to him, and he hears it as he moves, a high pitch moan.

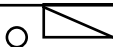
A whisper, but it sounds all wrong, like the death of boys like him. He wishes he could warn them somehow, before it happens.

Maybe it's a warning for him. Sent by someone who's lived his life. If not his experience, the primacy of it, more what you feel than what you see and smell, and more like thought than both. Somehow woven into the Skeins under everything. Not the physical, but the concepts. The concept of a nice smell, petal rainfall, living earth.

He wears fitted clothes, sweaters and geneweaves, to keep as much out as possible. You can't fight That though, not all the way.

Past a point the tendrils seeping into your mind choke you less than other things.

They choke you, but when he follows the waver in space,



they seem less thorned. Less real. Everything else gets further away too, if you follow it close for moments. Soon all that matters is the waver, the shimmer in space and thought.

He has a gut feeling it can give him a boost somehow. Like something waiting past it is his to discover. Something that might shy away. Something that might smile.

It might not have to die, to give him a boost. Though he thinks, maybe, if he could see the way it does, he'd know why it stays on the other side of the waver.

Everything wavers if you look close enough. There's a design, he thinks, some kind of tapestry behind everything. What we think and see and smell and hear. This waver is the one he sees. It's the one he's meant to see, for some reason.

He's found the waver. He slouches as he walks toward it, and it doesn't stay for him. It shivers as it waves away in the petal breeze. More a flow than breeze, the air thick with gloop motes, vivid shades, the hybrid rainbows of fauna.

The bright fades through his eyes when he closes them. His eyelids are a part of the Skein, as far from his psyche





as it wants. It's the only way it can make sense, he thinks, from the tapestry. The things that hurt and the things that feel like black smoke. They're the same. The psyche doesn't like the choosing.

Doesn't like it because motes dust it anyway. Soon a layer, a film of taint, something that stains the places you can never clean.

Dark hue to the core, geneweaves that fall apart after one wearing.

He feels the vibration closer than ever, a touch, a ripple in his awareness.





BOY

The Psych Oracle is waiting for him in the heart of his Tender. He didn't know she could penetrate so far. Well, that she would ever want to. There's not much in his Tender now, and it's getting worse. He's losing, he sees, more of it, trying to chase hope and getting stung. His arm waxes between numbness and pain.

Not much in his Tender to stop people going deep, if they wanted, other than disgust.

His Oracle is cloaked by her smokescreen, acrid today, moroso, he thinks. It blends with the smokeskein, the haze of things. So he can't tell where her smokescreen ends, and the Skein begins. Tell where that blurs into the pheromones and smells and colours. He's never known the end of things. He's just watched as things drain away.

They call this depression, an ouroborous of sadness, that feeds off anything. It hunts through the Skein, the foliage, the pheromone sea. It even burrows through the roots, follows them into your psyche. Until you see, with total clarity, that your Tender is dying.

You can only pack the darkness away for so long. In the





end you see it on every curl, rotting every tip, fuzzing the edges, friction breaking.

He chokes, coughs, tries to spit out more smoke than he swallows. He feels it wrap around his lungs anyway. They feel like diamonds, black and edged, lodged inside him. His arm screams as it waves through the smoke, a jagged, thorned shape lost behind the Psych Oracle's cloak.

She doesn't want him looking at it. When he can't see it, though, it's even scarier. He feels the urge to bring his arm close, so he can see that it's healed, sudden, virginal.

His arm seems lost behind the surface of thought, and he knows if he saw it, it would be the same. Still frozen and cold, and his psyche would remember again, and freeze him.

The Oracle beckons, and he moves, not feeling any choice, not even in his muscles and bones.

"Child," the Oracle says. "Sad to see. The taint has found you, like others."

He doesn't feel choice in his tongue, either. "So what? It happens to a lot of people. I don't know how to track the



Sun. If you cared you'd tell me things like that. Things worth knowing. If anything is even worth knowing. If anything can stop the taint."

"The taint," the Oracle says, "isn't important." Her voice creeps along the Skein, drops so sudden that his ears chase it.

"The only way it's not important is if none of this is real," he says. "Aren't you supposed to come at me a different way?"

"Boy," his Oracle says, "I've travelled far. I'm not sure how you think I waste my time, but more live in Mutate but you. If you need pheromones," her shadow wavering as she speaks, "I can flower them. You need to find the shimmer."

"I tried," he says. "My psyche got maimed." Then bile rises in him, blacker and sicker than he's felt since he can remember. "I'm ready to give in. I don't think some forest glitch can help."

"Don't find the glitch for you," she says. The smoke wafts near her mouth, and that's all of her he can see, razor thin teeth.





“Why should I find it?” he says.

“For the glitch,” she says, and already sounds far away. Probably, he thinks, just popping into Mutate from some divine extra-dimensional reality.



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A LITTLE TOO CLOSE

The Oracle leaves the way she must have rooted in. The acrid smoke warps every layer of the Skein that he sees and some that are invisible. Like the things the heart needs, buried under the wants like bones.

He smells something his psyche screams is death, his mind not too far behind. For his mind it's decay, and he can't tell if it's because of the Oracle's warp, or the taint in his Tender. It may be both.

He thinks somewhere, in some basic way, the Oracle was telling him to focus. So he does. The smoke clears away, and he looks at his arm, expectant.

It's still iced over, but darkened, like it's absorbing the taint.

Unfair, he thinks. The taint should at least be a little further away in the Skein, if it's going to be there at all.

A little too close, the pain a little too visceral. Too near the reality that everyone makes him care about.

He thinks he'll have to go out hunting for the shimmer glitch again. But he sees the sparkle, the blur of boundary



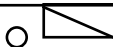


and tear, dead centre in front of him, wisping to the left.



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TAINT SKIPS

He saw shape, dark, flickering, fuzzed with black light.
Something light that wanted, some day, to be heavy.

He just wants to float, but that won't help his Tender. It
was gone in an eye blink, so he wasn't sure he'd seen it.
The ripple, the echo, and what spread from it, more sliver
than stain on the Skein.

The tears in his Tender are like faraway stars, the sunlight
burning through now. The sun should be good for them,
but he thinks it might be hurting them. Part of the reason
they're blackened. When it hits them it doesn't hit them
the right way.

Maybe the part he can't see is all charred. Or maybe the
taint skips the skins of the leaves, rots them from within,
in the folds.

Maybe it's like that for all the Tenders. His is the only one
that shows the taint underneath, breathes the smell of it.
He's never ventured far into other people's Tenders. Only
the places where the peripheries venn in chao harmonics.
Those that pulse everyone down to the primacy. Even that
makes it hard for him to focus.





He sees things in those peripheries that he's not sure any one else sees, and knows even less how to ask about them.

He knows, deep in the pit of him, in one moment or other he'll find out. He's moving towards it, a tangle beyond light and meaning, and when he gets there he'll know for sure. Until then, the universe only leads him to wavering places when his Tender has gone dark. When the taint is too acrid to keep breathing. When he knows he can never know the brush, so he might as well know the shimmer.

If it's somewhere in the black holes of the Fauna, he wants to know it. Though he doesn't know if you can go in these black holes, and still keep yourself.

He thinks if there are things that can do that, they wouldn't spend time in the acrid of Orcha Mutate. They would be somewhere else. Somewhere where the signs press you without the need for frontier.

It's all so beautiful. Sometimes the anxiety of maintaining sweeps over him. Something he can almost sense, distinct from the pheromone sea. A current in it, one that burns him when his arms touch it. So nice, but there's always something that calls for his attention. Somehow bays for it, through the fragrance and vibrations.



He hopes the shimmer is a boost, but maybe it's an escape.
Maybe there's just nothingness behind it, nothing to take
care of. And he loves his Tender, feels it in his heartbeat
but he feels something else too.

Feels that maybe nothingness would be easier to under-
stand than whatever's out there. Whatever moves the sun
and knows how it burns.

He once wanted to travel far, like the Oracle does. See the
parts of Orcha Mutate that are brighter, warmer, safer.

It's not that he's stopped wanting. He's just realizing his
place in the Skein, how he can thrush but never thresh.

Maybe this is growing up.





BROKEN LOOM

He sees the tail or tendril again. He doesn't know what he wants the hybrid to be. The ghosts of Mutate can look dead up close. Like they've clung to a niche, more nightmare than dream.

He's moving fast after it. His geneveaves taking brush with them, wrapped around and streaming blades. His feet leave marks, but he knows they'll soon be gone to wind and petal. The shimmer flits away and he stays with the space it left behind, the verdance, he sees now, a little more faded. Whitened, like sunlight has slipped through the verdance. The trees are ancient, their bark grained, heavy brown. On the edges of his sight they look cut up, but he doesn't look closer.

He remembers where the waver was, how it looked, a resonance in the Skein, pure like that, a wave in the pheromone sea.

He throws himself at it. His body stretches out. The Skein parts, like it's always wanted to. The threads of it unspool, a fallen angel spinning a broken loom. They are thin and soft, like gossamer, like silk.



LOSING

Meaning collapses on him, like it always does. It's the Thot spaces. The first part of the collapse is fear. The fear is everything he's forgotten to be afraid of. He's poured it into the spaces in his psyche and now the drawing will make him face it.

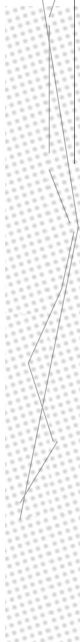
Here be monsters with too many eyes. Blinding lights, gone in moments but back the moment you don't want them. He forgot it was like this, flash backed that it was less than it was. Flashing astral planes, galaxies, decades. Different quasars, ones with no bearing. Waking, sleeping. Another world between the folds. This is losing yourself.

The hybrid flits and warps around him, crackling with energy. It shocks out and dances everywhere. He's drowning in it. It's a warm tide, somewhere deep under sunrise. The waves wash over him, bright and pure.

A purr, something seen in the paws of birth.

Something Dear.

A white light that blinds, shadows flowing in black, entropy waterfall.





ACHE

His arm is frozen now. He can't feel it. When he moves it, it hangs heavy in the air, like a weapon.

His whole body is frosted, though he can still feel that. The frost is different. It's not the dense skin of ice that encases his arm to elbow blade. It's motes instead, a film of them, patchy over skin. In places they are lines of cold, and they hurt like slivers against his soul.

He sees mountains of ice, thick with spires reaching to sky.

He sees sky. He sees sky and his psyche sings before his eyes flash that he isn't seeing sun. It's brighter than it was under the Orcha Mutate canopy. The sky, though, is blanketed by smoke, like his Oracle's smokeskein. It looks nacreous, thick and dark, like the taint, and for a moment he wonders if this is where the taint comes from. It lives in this place beyond space and sight. It can slip into any layer of the Skein, whenever he wants.

He sees it as an enemy now, something infinitely powerful.

It's far above him. The world around him is shifting. The mountains of ice redden, become hills of blooded dust. He



takes a step forward, looking for the shimmer, or what it might look like here.

The world shifts again, to something hard and torn. The ground is charcoal gray, cracked so his feet fall to bridge it. Then it's the ice again, and all three now, some sort of trinity. He wants to close his eyes to it, but he sees a shape, concrete in motion. Moving behind mountain and hill and ruin.

He moves to it. It moves, but he can follow it with eyes. It's not like the Skein. He has to keep moving. He's following it through the physical now, though he's far from home.

Thinks he might come back through the Skein to dead things.

His arm still swings heavy, his body starting to blister over the frost motes. His skin is tattered with dead flakes, blackening as it peels, so he knows the taint is in him. His veins feel thick. Tendrils coiled around his psyche, meaningless except for their pain.

He feels like his blood is shattering, whatever his psyche thinks his bloodflow is. It's going away.

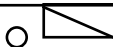




Frosted stone gouges into his sole, tearing it. He feels cold air on the skin, bristling, scared. His skin screams he needs to breathe again. He's forgotten.

When he breathes he forgets his thoughts. Into his lungs flows fear, dark and cold, and it finds the tendrils, thickening them.





AMBROSIA ACID / DIFFERENT THINGS

He sees the smokeskein first. Smells acidity. Ambrosia acid.

Then the Psyche Oracle, wizened and beautiful at once.
Collapsing into humility.

And inwards into the fold, paper cuts and wrappings.

Different things.

He wakes.

The Oracle is beside him. "What did you see?"

The universe, he tells her, dancing around itself.

"The love chains?" She says. "You saw the love chains?"

He's silent. Gathering back into himself.

"Something is trying to break them," she says, her smoke-Skein tightening around her. Seeking halo, the dust-cling glitter of celestia.





PALE LIKE HIS FLESH

He thinks it's days. He's lost time. The only true way to tell is sunlight, the Oracle says. Everything else is just vibrance.

"Where should I go?" He says. Movement is confusing now. You could end up anywhere.

"These are the edges of Mutate," she says. "What we want is at the core. Where the sun lives."

The sun is somewhere out there, he says, far beyond the canopy.

"No," the Oracle says. Her arms fold together, soft, palms closing over elbows. Hugging herself. "The sun lives at the core of the Mutate. Inside something they call walls. It burns against them, but can't escape."

"Maybe I want to go home," he says. He looks around. In the solid Skein, Dear lazes in a curl of fur. His black tips move in the vibrance of the harmony.

"I mean," he says, "stay here." Feels confused.

"I know," the Oracle says. There's a rose tinge in the aura



of her smokeskein. lilacs on a summer's day. A flutter in his brain, the sensate pale, like his flesh.

Ragged butterfly wings translucent in the mist haze.

"You need to reach the Sun," she says, slow and steady, "anyway."

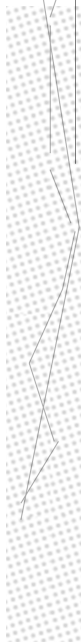
He sees all sides of her now, the confidence and fear. She's diffused it into her psyche, spread it in waves, keeping it balanced. All her haptics mixing, he thinks, so in the end she has no haptics at all.

Just an ocean of sensate that's everything at once.

Kind of like the underskein, he thinks.

"Go," she says, and he does. He only thinks after Dear finds him with eyes and nuzzles his geneweaves.

When he thinks he's already moving, and hadn't noticed.





THIS BARK

The Core of Orcha Mutate doesn't look tainted, but he sees it is, though his eyes have to rove far to see it. He feels like his eyes are slipping through the underskein. His sight is coming back frosted, burned and aged, and nothing he sees might be true.

Dear's tail swooshes the air, like it feels more sensate than any other part of him.

Morgan tries to trace the spiral with eyes, but it's too complex now. Invisible, forgotten, and fractal in ways his psyche can never hold. Dear's generating an energy he can't see, but can feel, waving between cells, settling them in patterns. It's like the vibrance, but he feels it on the inside first, tries to match it up to what he's feeling later.

Never what he thought he wanted, but he feels safe, floating on Dear's thermal waves.

He focuses again, remembering he's looking for colour. He has to follow the colour, and at its heart it's like the taint. He sees in the hues the bleached white of the taint's bones. Something that pretends to be healthy.



That's where the truth is, the things that want to make you look away. The taint is so you don't feel like you should.

He knows that now. He's seeing something change in the flora. He didn't want to trust his eyes.

The whitening isn't going away. It's lacing through. He sees it under the hue, the colour splotches, blotted like ink. Then there is only the brightness of things unreal. He touches the petals of the flora. No matter their kind, they feel like paper, like cloth. They cut his palms open, but the wrongness hurts more.

He looks at Dear. Dear looks wary. He feels ashamed. He dragged Dear into this. If Dear's scared it's not because he's a coward. It's because there's something to be scared of.

Even the moss bark is whitening. He can't stop himself. It's the same thing that made him touch the spore bubbles. It takes him now, stretches his arm forward. His fingertips grasp, split at the touch. He sees red, but it doesn't stop him. He continues to press against the moss that clings to this bark.

His skin burns, even through the blisters and Dear's reve-





nants. The moss is cloth and paper, like the flora. It's more ingrained, more oblique, but it numbs just like the taint of his Tender. No. It's worse, because it's trying to look different.

Trying to look like something it isn't. It's a discord trying to look like a harmony.

Once he finds the oblique, he can follow it easier. The more of it there is around him, the easier it is to see, and on and on. Dear has been silent for time. His tail isn't wooshing anymore. It just twitches, the vibrations uncertain. He thinks that's just because he's close.

Somewhere deep in his heart he knows the vibrations Dear makes can never be unkind. Anyone who feels them out at the Mutate's periphery, right now, wouldn't feel panic. They'd feel, Morgan thinks, a gentle stir in their psyche, guiding them to be, in the growth of their Tender, a little bit safer.

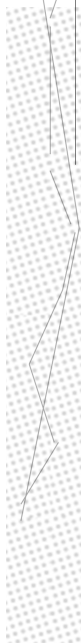
The sky past the canopy isn't sunlight, and it isn't absence. It's a red that matches, in its wells along his lines, the colour of his blood. What bubbles from him, pops and swells, is something that can never be tamed. Can never be tamed because it will always be, whenever it's looked for.



He feels that this is something that's been kept from him.

The bark is peeling, the cloth of it obvious now in the winds that break against him like currents. Dear's fur is stiff, bristling, like the absence is settling under his skin and pushing his hair out.

That's when he sees the Denizens. Their smokeskins black, their faces hidden. And their vibrance, reaching him in deep places, unholy.





TABLEAUS

He can't tell if the Denizens look like him. They are tall and slender and seem to stretch under their black Skein, trying to break what you see.

Dear stands before him. He tableaux against the skinned shapes, and Morgan sees how small he is. Small, lithe, and coiled into himself. The canopy is made up of vines that twist over bark and branch like serpents.

Behind the denizens he can see a wall. Flat black, featureless. Clean of the leaves that swirl around it with the vibrance of everything.

The Denizens move towards him. They separate to flow through the paper trees, find each other around them again. Like water flowing through a creek, he thinks. The kind of cold water that he could never flow to his Tender.

Another way he failed.

Dear hisses, the sound of it gnawing at him. He remembers when he found Dear in the underskein. He was so happy, so pure.

I've messed everything up, Morgan thinks. I didn't know



I'd have to go this deep, just to fix my Tender.

I thought if it was my fault it would be easy to fix.

The Denizens are spacing out. The smokeskein fills their absence, keeps them chained. The chain of smoke looks woolen, like his sweater, but abrasive. He steps back. They keep moving forward.

Dear mewls in a high pitch, but keeps his stance before Morgan. His footing sure and even, though the ground his paws rest on looks more cloth and spore than earth.

Behind the nacreous wall of smoke, Morgan thinks, is another wall. Something gray and sterile, though he isn't sure.

He wishes something would reach, hands from darkness, and draw him. Keep him warm, and spread the fire under the ground. Not so it breaks through, but so it warms and lights the ancient roots of his Tender.

But inside he knows he must venture into it.





EWCIIGIZI
AET
TUCU2
WCCUWZUW
WUECEWU2
UUEWUW
COMWUW
WIZU2
EWUWUW
UWUWUW
ZSE
ZUWUWUW
UWUW
UWUW
WUEW
DOWUW
EU
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WU WU
UWUWUW
UWUW
EUWUW
ZEU DU
WU EUW
WUWUWUW
UW
COMUEUW
WUWUW
ZUW
DOWUW
UWUW
TOWUW



Name: tohka creuset

Birthday: 5 november

Sex: female

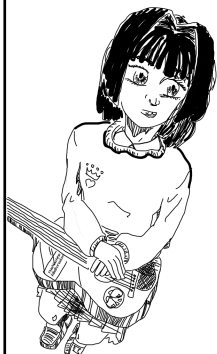
Occupation: student? v-idol?

Likes: shrimp crackers, lychee
jelly, all dressed chips, empty
cities

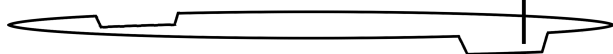
Dislikes: fussy people

Blood type: b

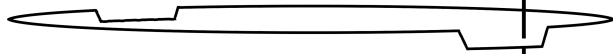
Seen with: n/a

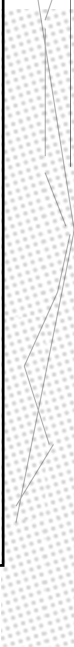
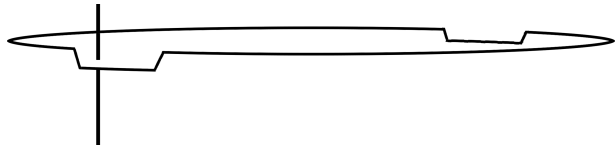


growing up within the urbanext project developments, tohka was a student of slightness, slight verve, slight beauty, etc... but given the development of the internal os and manipulation of virtual space, it had been reported that she became much more withdrawn, only responding when necessary. she was frequently exhausted after school or using the internal os as the neural activity can be intensive. this caused much further strain with her parents as her graduation neared leaving her to enter an elevator within the residence



building and disappeared. while her presence reappears in the virtual idol group, alterna, it had already been many years since she was alive and many of her records have been revised for fan-works.





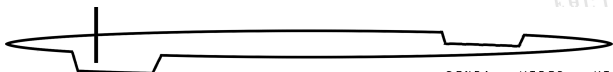
the heckler and koch g3ka4 is the carbine variant of the g3. despite being one of the smaller variants of the battle rifle, much of its touted features are retained: 20 rounds of 7.62 x 51mm ammo, reliability and geometric looks. its low recoil augments the user's control placing accurate shots at even farther distances at semi-automatic.

while its data has been scanned for many late 20th century conflict servers, its practicality and ability has seen it become popular with rl-users who do their own tune-ups and have custom schematics uploaded onto the wired.

the heckler & koch vp70m is a machine pistol with burst-fire capability. one of the first polymer pistols, its sleek looks are unmistakable. although its performance requires a bit of nuance to use effectively.

weapon info





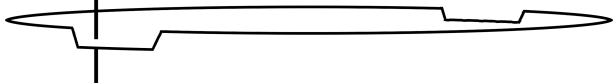
DENPA = WIRED = VIOLENCE

psYCHogramm

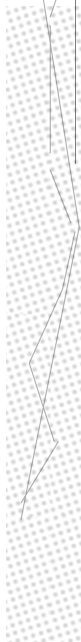
ELECTRICA SIGNALIS CONSUMMATUM

Synopsis

users wander the infinite plazas within their internal os. foxtel, one such user, darts between each of these old worlds distinegrating in electric signals, one bullet at a time.



2'
LWCIGI
AET
TVCN2
VCCNM2
WPECN2
GILNENB
CONWOD
B12N2
EVALIDN'
NIVICE2
23E
2026ENDI
120W
0N12
VGI0N'
WVENW
DOROE
E1
TAVOE
M1 N1
IMCIDIDN
LENOR
E102WOD
2ED DO
WE E111'
VDI12CI
10W
CON2EC1E
WEL'
211
DOROE
120W
TOWEN





cw: guns, violence, violent fantasies, depression, disappearance/implied suicide, ghosts(?)

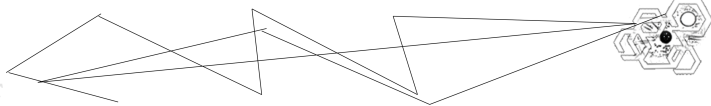
reflections waver beside me from the ceramic tiles rendering this hallway, grids of jeweled terminals perspire droplets of endless corridors on the once smooth concrete wall pockmarked in craters and scratches, now the rock it once was radiating from the light fixtures like the blasted surface of the moon.

reaching the reception slot, a guard in class a2 polymer body armor clasped on a wrinkled dress-shirt, raises his head away from his surveillance monitor, its light slipping from his face as if a change in the time of day into his sallow expression to regard me from behind the narrow glass between us, his gaze slides over my card, the wrinkles on his face strain at the photo, perhaps trying to match the details of the silhouette to my profile, his uncertainty hardly adhered to the flat expression on his security pass

PROTOCOL 01: INHABITANTS

VCCNWSV
WVECEWV
NICEBVV
CONWODO
WISNS
EWWVIDU
NIVICEZ
SSE
2025END
1B20W
0012
VIG00V
WVEWV
DOROVE
EI
TUBOVE
W1 NI
TWCIDID
LEWOB
EIN2WOD
2ED DO
WE ERI1
VDIB12C
10B
CON2EC1
WEL'
211
DOROB
1B20W
T01

2
LVCIF
AET
FVCN2
VCCNM2W
HPECENW2
Q1NEBBV
COMMOD0
B12N2
EVBVIDV
N1BICE2
23E
2026END1
112NW
0N12
VR10NV
WVENV
DOROVE
E1
FVBOVE
A1 N1
IWCIDIDN
LEWBOV
E102WOB
2E1 DO
WE ER11
VD1B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
WWE1
211
DOROV
1B2NW
ROVEN



before throwing the card back to me through the outlet under the glass, almost to ensure an efficient operation of his duties before returning to the faint cheer from an e-sports battle royale with soldiers jumping in simulated hillsides, his face glows from the monitor erasing its skeletal juts that hollowed his cheeks.

fluorescent lighting palpitates down the hall from each fixture as darkness laces the milky pools of light. i draw the g3ka4 carbine rifle from the harness carrier concealed by the foxhound jacket's adaptive geometry, the polygonal fabric now settles into a calm sea. unfolding the oared stock to cushion the rifle into my shoulder aiming down the receiver beamed toward the ringed front sight as i grasp the bladed handguard clamped under the barrel, moving forward, every step's contact might meld the rendered halls beside me, my presence occupies a fraction of the thousands of renditions of this corridor as if a pixelated phantom shimmers beside, granted out of ceramic, particles thrumming within the light fixtures above.

off the reflection from one of the tiles, men in suits wait by the elevator, their hands twitch near their coat lapels, afraid of the milky shapes rippling on the walls, the moon almost full, there had been rumours that a non-existent





888th floor appears at 12:21 from this 887 leveled mega-complex. many users on the wired's bbs attributed the rumour to mere ghost stories found among videos of people writhing in demonic possession, or assumed there was a banal explanation, a clerical error or someone imagined a ghoul while going into shock from stubbing their toe.

if that were the case, the carbine rifle and supplies made me overdressed and overarmed for the occasion. but then, so were the guys by the elevator. underneath the long coat body's adaptive polygons that retain a plausible figure, conceal a satchel containing cameras, bugs, fingerprint powder extending crowbar, food capsules and water enough to last a couple days to avoid physical dehydration, the coat itself strapped in 20 round magazines for the g3ka3 and 9mm magazines for the vp70 stored in its stock attached to a thigh holster. all these objects here as if i had been wishing for a cataclysm until only i and my target surface onto a desolate plane that once veined these reflections of the corridor, rendering all connections into dust settling onto the remains upon the earth that slit the sky.

middle elevator arrives, the suited men form a perimeter around the entrance where i glimpse a suitcase carrier



backing into the unit as his guards start to file in. i keep back so they would not catch my errant reflection until i hear the sliding doors close. at the interface panel, orbbed numbers light up one by one to the unit's destination, an ellipsis of transit, silent inhabitants moving to their residential units in the complex. withdrawing the rifle behind the jacket, the magnet harness catches it while i opt for the vp70 pistol, springing out of its stock-holster into my hand wrapping around the polymer grip licking to support the slide canted towards the oblong muzzle, a solid yet thin trigger lies behind. another elevator arrives and i enter, vp70 behind my back while i sidle past an exiting older lady who flashes a glare, i press for floor 886, looking at my watch to predict their time of arrival. it was only 12:10 and no one had specified when this room would appear in seconds.

the elevator unit surges up with the pneumatic shaft once i select the 886th floor to make sure i do not arrive at the same time as my targets in a comical coincidence where we would stop in a moment of disbelief before scrambling. mirrored walls echoed my reflection, images repeated across each pane folded into this box unit, all connected by each impulse in a schematic of the self. even as the elevator stops for other residents, their images bounced



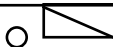


across each of the walls becoming near kaleidiskopic as small twitches, shuffles or absent gazes fragment in my gaze as these disembodied creatures monitor my moves or even act at any provocation.

despite the efficient suction pneumatic shaft, the unit itself retained its cubic structure instead of a cylindrical one used in newer buildings. some say that the use of the 21st century structures and motifs here are like why computers first came in a modular grey, to nullify some sense of frightening technological advancement vaporizing pastoral fields and family owned oligarchies.

floor 886, as requested, opens to a frame of concrete wall and tiles staring back at me before i hit the close elevator button to go up to 887, watch already at 12:20, the unit climbs a single floor until the lights cut, all the reflections extinguish into black as i back into one of the walls. maybe the entire unit would stop and plunge down all 800 floors, a final roller coaster thrill before a climactic crumple into annihilation more total than a gunshot wound.

drawing a flashlight from my pocket with the vp70 reveals a white circle that blots out my reflection while barely lighting the corners of the unit suspended mid-air from my steps echoing through the floor moaning down the



shaft, i look for an emergency door above but the unit drops, jolting into place and i was to step into some new chaotic world imagined as long ago as y2k or some such dream of technological failure.

12:21 and nothing happened, worried that this whole thing might be unfounded despite the breakdown from the elevator unit already a good sign, i take the extendable crowbar from my bag and drive it in between the doors to force them open, unveiling another floor like the ones before it but this one utterly silent, untouched by the warbles of appliances behind the doors which were untouched of decorations. my watch did not move. yet an instance where a glob of paint texture tears off the walls to reveal a wireframe model of the corridor before returning to its intended surface retaining a preternatural glow, its tiles barren of reflection.

moving my fingers, the air responds with a faint electricity, a frequency of static that could call virtual object to palm. seemingly, i entered the wired (or virtual space) from this elevator, a frequency looms with milky figures whose tendrils approximate into limbs sculpt out of the fluorescent signals. they pass through me as if bodies of mist and i stay to the side, leaning on the wall pressing onto my flesh, a





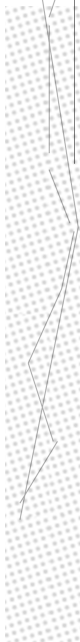
point of contact. through these bodies, someone else leans on the opposing wall, a young girl in a school uniform whose eyes i can't make out obscured by her slightly dyed brown hair falling to one side, unaffected by the static, she moved her head very slightly, perhaps discerning something out of the white waves that might meet her in this corridor. there isn't enough static for my voice to transmit so i try walking along the wall to face her but by the time the figures melt, there was only concrete wall and as i turn my head, the corridor empties with the static calming into a low electric drone characteristic of the wired, the bright figures returned to the canisters above me emitting their meagre light.

surprisingly, my internal os was able to open with the virtual interface ready with various applications from echo-location to enhanced movement executables, time still ran as normal, reading it from the real world. there was even enough signal to enter the wired where i set up a connection into my local server. it was evening peak hours so the leisure servers should be running. a window prompts me to enter the nearest door, cold fluorescence wipes away with warm bouquets of gold light from the interior of a japanese grill house. at each table blooming with raucous laughter and drunkenness after a long work day with shin-



ing glasses of beer frothing at the rim, noises of celebration for coming home, the cheerful atmosphere created for this room since many who frequented it liked the bar-room aesthetic brimming with nightlife delights recreated from old century shinjuku.

each table represented a private chat room within this server and i find the one requested for me with kunakida, viper and faux already there, each of them represented by, respectively: an anime girl in serafuku with a tight bow and rehearsed way of saying 'niyaniaya' which was funny to think of since kunakida was a fujoshi and that soon she too might be able to rid her human speech and body to become anime, virtual fey in electric cities; a grizzled man in full combat fatigues - viper was someone from a /k/ server who would pass weapon deals here and there, and i worried that he might be a plant from some overeager armament company smuggling guns to start some war prompting me to note the brands recommended and related gun crimes; faux's avatar was modeled after a corrupted dataset and he had decided to stick with the aesthetic, a suited body with a face of polygonal clouds, modelling each errant piece of geometry and static that reacted to different emotional state.





‘hi, foxtel! (^.^)/’ kunakida waves to me. one of the moderator bots asks us about drinks and i order a brio soda.

‘so, as i was saying...’ viper continues ‘the key to success here is having enough resources to pool in. that way, if anything happens, we have provisions’

‘survivalism is mere desperation. in this era, being content with being alive is no longer sufficient’ faux sits back, unconvinced of whatever viper was planning, as the brio soda arrives on the table from one of the mods.

‘and i’m saying that there’s enough psychic burnout to go around. you know it’s bad when all the work is done at home and no one goes outside anymore. motherfuckers get restless’

‘come on, foxtel is here, let’s try and at least not leave him out. ^⊙□⊙^’ kunakida parts their debate so we might have a semblance of decorum. funny to see an anime schoolgirl teach manners to a glitchfaced salaryman and rugged operator. we give a small toast now that our drinks are here and everyone takes their sip while i still wonder how faux even drinks with all those shifting polygons in their face.

‘sorry, just trying to figure out this supply line for an



insurgent group for another building, they're starting a coup' viper explains to me

'really? i wasn't aware people still do those,' i mention mostly thinking of bbs' from disgruntled workers or residents, burned out consciousnesses of restless bodies kept in their rooms with all the virtual labour across the wired, imagining revolt only in images of historic coups or shit-posts of crowds spilling into the streets waving a tattered flag of an old world all in the void of text boxes. despite the string of these messages, they only remained as such.

'it's a great myth, revolutions and flags from the steely commandant' faux concludes.

'nah, don't worry about it faux's just likes to think he's so objective and transparent which is why the idiot won't do a face reveal.' viper eases in his chair as if a throne to a kingdom of chaos and disarray among him in the clinks of beer glasses and riotous conversations.

'you say that as if human integrity is idiotic' faux's face stops moving a moment but his tone indicates a smirk.

'who even reveals their face, i wouldn't show you mine (/ \)' kunakida intervenes. i had never seen their faces





either but whenever the time called to see a user in person, it usually resulted in awkward exchanges and disappointment perhaps hoping that our bodies might invoke an innate joy that our veins throbbed towards but could only manage aborted interaction.

‘ew, kunakida probably has fujoshi stank’ viper yawps with the kind of vulgarity a lot of outsiders might think the wired was for, causing senate boards to call for restricted access from their decrepit pantheons already superseded by the exchange of data and information.

‘you’re the one with the unshaven look, even in the wired you choose to look unpresentable.’

‘that’s just a construct. no one can be the ideal person,’ viper replies and i was unsure what he even meant by that, let alone if he was just stringing a bunch of words together, the kind used to rope in some heady topic to ascertain their intelligence to the jury.

‘well, the form of etiquette has been with us since the dawn of time. if not ideal, at least being benign would bring us closer to such’

‘i think the only place you’d be working for is a crime syn-



dicade, which is fine, everyone participates in some petty crime ('ㄣ'). kunakida sighs to viper who arguably, would be doing more lawless activities with their strings in the weapons trade, strumming up another noteworthy deal.

'so... what's up' kunakida turns to me. 'i can't seem to id your signal origin.' this also gets faux to pay attention, the polygons stop shifting, the puzzle of his expression nearing completion.

'oh, you know that building with the 888th floor?'

'still pursuing that eh?' viper shrugs, his dismissal apparent.

'i'm in right now. i've trailed some suspicious characters reported on the building's forums.'

<images of surveillance, three suited individuals with baggage at elevator on floor g at 12:15 2/2/2xxx, another image 12:24 exiting elevator, the same within a 10 minute span every couple days to establish a pattern. possibly a delivery as the individuals leave without it>

'they have been spotted at a time close to the one specified in the post, going up and down within a time interval



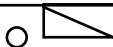
that would be too short for them to simply go and drop something off even at a second floor. even the days spotted all had a full moon. and with the timespan, maybe this place is outside linear time'

i open the search engine, my hand curves to pull in parallel information from building visitor passes, security footage and posts about the rumoured 888th floor with various video commentators reading the story and giving explanations, some handwavy and others looking into various myths of moon deities, a particular one noting about the presence of a 'mugenjo' or dream castle along with other rumours about the elevator's constant malfunction at that time and a board asking about missing persons. the possibility of perhaps more behind this floor, people going missing or even disappearing, only gets a skeptical look out of viper, who deems the supernatural useless to the business of the real world which probably relates to why his use of the wired is mostly transactional.

'you sure you didn't hit your head? maybe the elevator fucking killed you and you're bleeding' viper asks.

'if so, i'm wondering how the lot of you ended up biting it.'

'this is the individual who has purchased a heckler & koch



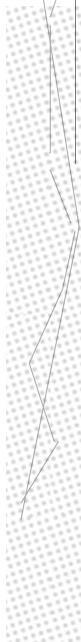
g3 and a vp70, the former with tac-light, laser sights and various internal modifications. i still wonder how you are going to fight information with smoke and gunpowder' faux surmises.

'this does surprise me. most vloggers would kill for a haunted space °o°' kunakida adds.

'or real estate, given that it's always a race to claim new units when they're made err-appear but i'm surprised they haven't moved in on this. everyone's always looking for space, or opportunity'

'finance only has a certain amount of superstition it seems' faux's face ripples a moment before finding a shape more akin to a crystal 'so... this space... what information have you gathered about its use?'

'they got a suitcase and they look like they might be armed. there could be a smuggling operation going on and it's practical if not artless for any mob to store contraband someplace that may or may not exist since space is somewhat at a premium these days. it's like being able to hide a data drive at will, disconnecting out of existence at any moment. but thanks to the rules of time, they go like clockwork. there and out the same time.'





‘wow, you might be a better stalker than me (◊≡>≡)’
kunakida concedes.

‘it’s called reconnaissance.’

kunakida sticks her tongue out in a childish way.

‘well from that area, i think the 80 sects triad operate there with a huangzhu blockchain, formatted currency and conversion with minor things like drug smuggling and prostitution. however, i don’t understand why they would store supply so close as raids are common’ viper states.

‘maybe they want it close. that is money in there for them that’s right, what did you turn up kunakida?’ i remember asking her for some help on it a while back.

‘well nothing too much, i’ve sifted through building records and doxxed multiple residents with hidden profiles, all coming up clean with some in connection to 80 sects or questionable things like shell companies. there is one though, there was a story about a resident who disappeared. a tohka crueset. it’s old so much of it is second-hand. they say that one night she had an argument with her parents and then left. they quickly called building security to keep an eye on her movements but they claim to



have seen nothing, or no one pass by.'

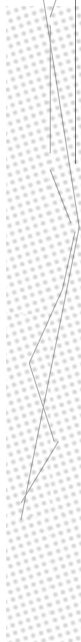
a photo of tohka appears out of kunakida's hand and it's the same girl from earlier in the hall, an expression that seemed to smile only at the urges of her parents telling her to be more presentable

'it's always the parents driving their kids away. what a tragedy' viper shakes his head

'so, you're saying this disappearance might have something to do this 888th floor?'

'maybe, based on witnesses, tohka's friends say that her parents don't treat her well but neighbours and adjacent family members have a consistent record of saying that they just worry about things like finances a little too much'

'much to their detriment.' i said. taking a closer look, the hair dyed a slightly lighter shade and aloof expression that still might catch your gaze in its several rotations under spotlights. there was a v-idol who looked almost exactly like her from a group called alterna, an idol unit doing songs and routines based off an everyday look of bustling city streets with windowpanes that glimpsed into various interiors, the thrill of a city and the unit would take great





care to mimic that past-aesthetic as many of them dressed in period specific school uniforms, singing ballads that evoked those times between school and work with soft drumbeats and 2000's era rock. when i bring it up, the resemblance dawns on kunakida.

'right! she does look like her doesn't she?'

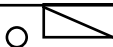
'that's kinda fucked up, i remember when missing people stayed gone'

'oh viper, scared of ghosts niyaniaya~ (` ▽ `)'

'first i gotta deal with all this wired shit fucking with people.'

and kunakida went on to pester viper who could only retreat lest he give to more of her barrages about how he's scared of the supernatural.

'whatever, i heard she's been doing a concert for tai shu kwong. you should be careful around them even if you're friends with one of their division leaders' viper gives a paternal warning. tai shu kwong was one of the megacorps that specialized in lifestyle services and products in eastern patch areas like montazuma with very strict security



protocols tightening in a trade war with their rival crime-
berg.

‘is that a coincidence?’ faux asks

‘at that? maybe. best to treat it as a relevant tangent i suppose’ i answer.

‘maybe, but the relationship between the two is still present. from missing student to idol. that must come from somewhere, you know?’

‘hm’

we hear a bell ping from someone entering the grill house, three suited men from earlier walk in which signals that they are nearby back at the apartment and i tell kunakida, viper and faux i’ll keep in touch before i disconnect, viper telling me my usual shipment of g3 parts should be arriving soon either way.

‘good luck, have fun, niyaniaya~(≧▽≦)’

‘safe journeys, foxtel. we will relay you any developments’

‘don’t die you son of a bitch’





after that send off, i blink into a dim room, outlines faintly discerned from a slit of light underneath the door now blocked by someone standing outside, i draw my g3 toward the door, running an echolocator that maps the room dimensions in mesh finding a short wall separating the living room from a kitchen where i creep behind for cover. slowing my breaths to steady my aim, files from faux and kunakida transfer to me with a receipt from viper that also contained an ad for some hypnagogic rap concert stream. the chime of the elevator rings from outside in an assemblage of metallic notes to form the toll of a bell that signals the arrival and the steps recede.

information opens in a pool of light around me as i sift through the records, swiping my hands left to right molds silhouettes of residents, infractions strain red on white records. tohka creuset, rotating hands bring related persons, immediate family and friends but turns up little. her father, a contract maintenance worker for several buildings and mother a part time receptionist, old jobs not yet subsumed in immaterial labour on the wired, holding on to the sweat of their brows, greased hands and time spent. a forum from her school that kunakida linked me to, talked much of tohka, the v-idol, her image becoming entwined with that idol's steps through those romantic



streets blooming of love flashing through the glimmer of city lights off windowed rooms just as distant as her photo, while resembling the v-idol, maintained its firm expression that would never think to place her hand on her chest to express yearning, particularly with defiant eyes that might have made her victim to lectures about respect, two droplets of another emptiness that evaded the white background around her.

tracing the thread on the 80 sects triad, conducting the narratives from related incident reports, old ram and chop attacks, ransom kidnappings and jewelry store robberies relating to government officials neglecting triad activity or getting assassinated by car bombs in old macau, black and white photos of burnt benzes, a quick slash left gets forum posts of possible drug dens and dead-drop spots coded in articles of antique auctions from certain words or numbers. running another program, i form a matrix of info, tracing the different threads, connecting them to the reports of tohka's disappearance. the fractal fails to form as there are no associations between her immediate family and the 80 sect triad, leaving me to sigh at now having two incidents to investigate. only a couple of keywords intersect between faux and kunakida's info, disappearance, work conditions.



a phone call ring materializes from kunakida and the electric signals load her form in front of me, jagged pixels melt into her avatar looking around the room, the vertices glint off her opal eyes, her mouth shrugs into a nonplussed line.

‘huh? this is one of the rooms? ●□_□●’

‘sorry, i haven’t moved in. wasn’t expecting a house warming party so soon’

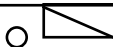
‘house warming, this place is like a corpse of a room. there’s no life in here □’

‘or no signs of it, we just live here...anyway what’s up?’

‘i picked up on something interesting, i’m sure you know of tohka’s little fandom.’

‘right, i guess no idol would be who they are without their followers’

‘well i’ve combed a bunch of social media accounts and i found one account under her name here’ the account on a social media platform shows an anime girl figurine that looks like tohka and it is almost unnerving to see her in



the real world in this fashion, in an artificial body created from her online persona into its state of suspension, the orbs of light reflecting off her eyes etched onto the figure's smooth face, as if to confirm her simulacra taking hold in the real world even in physical object

'strange, i didn't think people still made dolls. is this just not a role playing account?' i ask eyeing the recommended accounts also showing other tohka creusets, people living as her in the wired with log posts and updates of some distant high school day. this account seemed to read like a diary, with posts such as:

6:25 i am no longer here

6:27 my body is simply a city with portioned areas of work and pleasure, with no ends in sight

6:28 where do i begin, perhaps i never existed to begin with

7:18 moon apparatus arches, i am now filled with light, i do not remember when i felt as weightless as a river, my heart only submerges melding the heft of my hands

'i thought so too but this isn't playing her, but it seems



to embody some interior thought grasping at her in the static.

‘there are poets right?’ i ask, reminded of the system hijack trend among poets, using elementary hacks and disruption programs in order to deliver verse that upset the interrupted systems of commerce and conferences across the wired, creating affective disconnects.

‘yeah but this is kind of concerning content. like this is almost like a poem of the frustration of young people but applying with the face of a v-idol? and i’ve tried to ping the location of the posts but they give me a bunch of scrambled addresses, of places that don’t exist. like one of the loc’s were something like 82 lombard boulevard but that street only goes up to 17.’

i had not the faintest of how to pursue any of it in my current state - my body still remembering time, i yawn. the information here only sketched a vague outline of her but that entropy of what could’ve happened to her seemed all the more thrilling as i could only wait for another post, that this unending light of information might flicker of her presence, trying to claim itself from the various images produced from their angles and frozen light.



‘very well, i’ll follow the account. updates should come up if something happens’

‘niyaniaya, i was also hoping this account could get boosted. it really adds to the fandom other than the whole slice of life anime thing you know?’

‘so it appears’

‘that’s all i wanted to tell you. i have a live event to attend. i gotta keep up with a virtual let’s player.’ and she logs out without as much as a farewell and i follow the account.


i log my findings in a document within my investigation matrix before i make camp, the thought of renting a room, an old memory of how these spaces removed one from the commotion of busy streets behind the door into the glow of computer monitors, i start to lay a tarp and set up an electric lantern whose emittance of energy blows the sound of a little ember. i take a couple of fish capsules and konyaku from a tupperware box while i do a manual search through the information list, reports of gang activity and relations with other gangs from leaked cib reports, an updating infographic shifts in terms of triad activities forecasted, 80 sect has seen less raids and a more steady supply flow of accelerants and depressants all while my





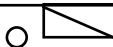
stomach imagines its hunger being satiated from the capsules.

it's already late so i prepare to sleep, setting down an explosive mine in front of the door then inflating the tarp into a cushion, the lights fade into the soft darkness of the room, and i'm a little glad there was still some vague presence that haunted the desolate apartment floor like dreams that might begin to percolate into the void.



i send a message to 'the producer', an old case handler from before i had started being a detective, handling bounty hunting cases of faces that would end up in scopes, ticks measuring distance to target and where to adjust each shot. he always set up closed spaces in rooftops due to his preference for unobstructed views of the sky and it was refreshing to see daylight which now melted away the concrete surroundings, the rooftop square contained by thin metal railing. air stirs with frenetic rushes of wind, endless signals perhaps lighting up distant rooms from the surrounding virtual city or the activities of real world transferring over.

'the producer' stood at the roof's edge looking below, the



streets speckled in colour out of a painting from a 1990's asian city scape, expressways curving from the mountains flickering with distant trees.

'how nice of you to visit'

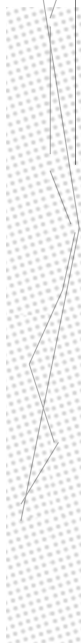
'i'm just surprised i didn't have to shoot anybody'

'that was just an uncaught exception. i simply didn't account for being trailed. someone of my position is always being trailed'

'how popular'

'i thought you'd be more popular with the military chunibyou aesthetic' they ask referring to the various mercenary companies created either for hire or sport in virtual maps, attempting to revive an atmosphere of total war without any of the political reasoning that might once rouse entire battalions lined up behind podiums, only the conflict itself remained, throbbing hearts and exchanges of gunfire, blasts of gunpowder that leave smoke consuming the lands as village ruins are recreated for military enthusiasts to live out their dioramas in virtual space.

'yeah right, i might as well join the military aesthete com-





pany. they do hits and raids you know?’

‘right.’ the producer only looked down, the windows from the skyscrapers had no silhouette of inhabitants, only the movement of cars below influences the air. ‘so what’s this case you’ve taken on?’

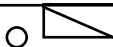
‘it’s just something i picked up on, pieced together out of surveillance footage. 80 sect triad storing drugs in some haunted floor that doesn’t exist.’

‘and yet you’re still there?’ producer asks, aware you would’ve been bored if that were really the case.’ the producer stretches their arms, their chest puffs up a moment with the breath from the crisp air before continuing. ‘plus, moon protégé talks about it every now and again. even saturna knows. the 888th floor is sort of an open secret’

‘hmpf, guess i’ve become ancillary’

‘oh, don’t be morbid, machinery and instrumentality go hand in hand. besides, what are you to do with that information?’

‘i’m not a cop, those 80 sects guys could do whatever they want.’



‘so you’re not going to report it. not many people would be able to go up there and have proof, you know’ the producer looks away a moment before asking, ‘and the missing girl? creuset, was it?’

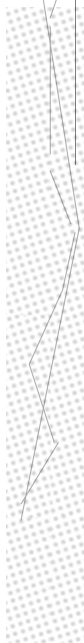
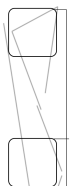
‘dunno how i feel about it...like the body that incarnates geometry/annexing my dreams, crossed out in aborted sketches’ i recall the line from a recent poetry text about the body and the wired.

‘ah yes, the one where in order for a dream to exist it must also be absent, but geometry is the tether somehow between the living world and the dream. think of why they build altars or transmutations with an arrangement of objects.’

‘like feng shui?’

‘sure’ producer shrugs before changing topic, ‘hey pass me your sidearm’

i give the vp70 to them and after examining it, they point it at me as white consumes my sight, the following shots in soft throbs before the rooftop scene returns the final shot dissipates into the air. they return the gun to me, the weight still the same as before indicating no lost muni-





tion, as the shots were simply simulations based on data from the weapon they manipulated in the closed space, gauging statistics and calculating the result of the gun's firing capacity.

'hell, that's a loose spring...' they mention.

'well indoors, the unpredictable can be a deciding factor.'

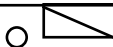
'you must be someone of some faith then.'

'like a virtual space with parameters that can be manipulated, one can also do the same for a psychosphere'

'hm' the producer thought a moment, their expression showed little emotion as if only to wait through the moment. 'so i saw you were following an account of a tohka creuset rp' they ask

'yeah, it's from a recommendation by kunakida. she says that something that can't be id'd is posting from that account, and it's outside the established narrative, like she sees it as an actual person or something.'

'hm...well, given my position, i do have access to some records...psychological ones at that. if this creuset person does exist i can probably pull something. schools do psych



evaluations. even with the growth of virtual space, it seems few people can really access the interiors of a person'

i pass him kunakida's files and the producer opens their hand, raising and batting at the air, manipulating a hidden interface, and they stop to think as i presume documents are loading before rotating their open hand in a tai-chi motion, grasping an unseen heft and weaving breath before opening their arms. this was their martial arts training at work, combined with system manipulation. a file appeared in my interface log. opening it only revealed a corrupted file, glyphs scrambling her photo refusing number, letter or sense, leaving only her height, age, weight, psychological divergencies: possibly avoidant personality, talking might be some effort but it failed to conjure much apart from a somewhat plain girl who might not easily open up to others, concealing something in those inscrutable broken texts, perhaps trying to find an ever-eluding form for her tumultuous states.

'i can't read this.' i state the obvious.

'it seems to be pure data. you have to remember that when she disappeared, her rebirth on the internet stemmed from a kind of death in reality, and reality things decompose. the creuset that had parents and an actual school life



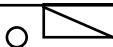


is gone. but revealing information can be influenced by many factors from what kind of other data in virtual space surrounds it. like an emotion, the relative interpretations of the physical aspects can begin to sway from even the slightest affect' this was their way of telling me that the document was going to be important, some inscrutable artifact from the next world, the world of forgetting that phases itself out of the records and even memory. 'since you are changing perspective on the case, this space depending on how volatile it is could change according to you, which means if the girl really is a presence on the 888th floor, it might change to reflect that.'

'why's that? isn't it just virtual space?'

'don't tell me you're naïve enough to think it's mere virtual space. a place like this being born despite the limited bandwidth allowed for buildings while large cannot be enough to render an entire floor with rooms that can support the remote wired connections of people. the 80 sects have managed their tactic this long because the first assumption was that there was extra bandwidth available. besides, a spiritual experience is more related to one's own perspective than one thinks'

'so, if i'm in a place more related to tohka, the corruptions



might change.'

'yes, but since when has information ever truly been the make up of a person?'

the sky ripples, particles of heat could nearly spin a mirage in this peaceful scene.

'you should transition back in.' a gale pulls me off, soaring over the painted streets that blur into the flat ceiling of the room. blue framed in the window, an imitation of day outside the corridor, i can picture breathing clouds into it if it were cold enough.

clearing the interface, i enter the corridor with the vp70 about to traverse into a quieting loneliness, immaculate to the point of warding away any human presence, almost the way when i was a child i would be kept away from desolate spaces beyond the beckoning amusements of playing blocks or whatever toys were strewn about the carpet, where i caught the vacant gaze of another, whose presence only kept me still.

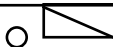
an amalgam of noise haunts the space with an unseen everyday, little strum of a guitar or the clatter of dinnerware melding together in this hall yet each individual sound





scatters across multiple rooms making it difficult to localize their locations. all this seemed like a game: whatever would be behind the door revealing more about the real creuset, a gameshow for a gross expose, stripping all the sheen of this stylized innocence, finding after all her lyrics and beauty that she might have been just a normal girl who shyed away from adults, not yet knowing how she might affect others, growing distasteful of honeyed compliments about her growth telling she will be a fine lady in one of the patch corporations or some other aspirational cliché. would there be a way that one might understand another, faster than signals in glances and silent meetings? each user encountered on the wired contained an absent human, whose presence felt despite not being present like my own body being invisible save for limbs.

connecting to a dedicated city server made by tohka's fandom, the door leads into a recreation of the suzuru district in an early 21st century city aesthetic when the windows still open with spectacles of couples meeting in cafes or mannequins in a diorama of a beach getaway workers once stared at for just a moment, longing for those far off vacations, the smooth geometric buildings casted shadows across the pavement as if predicting their future, a reality cast from the movement of the sun. yet there were things



to see along the avenues, it would have been a better place to at least concentrate on the case if not just to have some noises around me of footsteps from passing crowds and fragments of chatter. this was what the wired was used for. from mmo's to chatrooms creating digital public spaces like the plaza once did, recreating lively urban spaces once celebrated in photography books and art exhibits, the moon protégé triad even recreated a one to one scale kowloon walled city with users acting as residents or shop owners.

suzuru's residential district at sunset teems with doorways waiting for their homecoming inhabitants for dinners closed away from the city with the muted reports from news broadcasts and haphazard conversation, leaves still tremble from the coming breeze of nightfall. a few reports from the investigations on her disappearance trace her routine and i follow the directions the structure of her everyday that tethered her favourite cafes after school, resting at a park or just taking walks, these being also public knowledge within the server, users with avatars of tohka walk by and i find that the park was populated with many tohkas, some lounging under the shade reading books and others



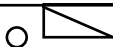


in a group where one throws their head back in laughter to some well-timed joke that roused a few errant giggles, this park seemingly contained the basis and apexes of her personality emulated by their postures, where each patch of grass or pathway, a tohka with a different temperament could appear at any moment in these fragment pastures meshed in cobblestone pathways where users with tohka's likeness might morph between reserved steps or magnanimous hilarity towards their unseen destination, whether somewhere in those rooms winking from distant high rises or the unknown server spaces connected.

at a train station designed like a long western rowhouse whose roof dims the light over the platform, i visit the convenience store cubicle with fluorescent glowing shelves that muted the bright packaging of the snacks, recording the kind of snacks she bought from talking to a couple of users, schoolgirls about the same age as tohka, wearing her hairstyle with the tails on opposite side of their neck

(shrimp crackers, lychee jelly, all dressed chips, what a weird combination)

a bubble tea stand where i asked a role-playing shopkeep-



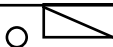
er what her favourite flavours were, guava, papaya but she didn't get tapioca and tangerine. questioning local users and gathering info, inferring her preferences such as her avoidance of citrus flavoured sweets, made me feel more like a detective in a classical sense instead of sleuthing through message boards and disguised conversation over the wired, but my questioning would slip into little chuckles from the tangents made by other users as if i too was part of this little everyday where users would wave to each other, chatting by the corner before departing to their destinations, one of the schoolgirl users mockingly asks me if i had a gun since i was a detective. information swirls around me from a homebrew infography program, identifying users as they passed by, the scene of waiting students and shop keepers opened with, portrait frames and identifying information from their signal origin, search history and possible infractions in red.

next train arrives at suzuru station, i board behind the of doors shutting, an exhale before the sunlit carriage moves forward, gaggles of students with creased collars whisper past confessions to a few delinquents in slanted poses talking in cantonese about some hallucinogens in rowdy noises, mention seeing tohka, thinking maybe their dosage was spiked before one of their cohorts nudged them



to keep quiet, all of these whispers grow while the train glides about the city encircling all of city centres from montazuma, kai-chiro, new europa blowing past us across amorphous houses or apartment blocks into the carriage, the wild rumours that inhabited the now glowing city lights like magic dust sprinkled from skyscrapers and condo buildings, the train's momentum softens the heft of the machines hurtling down the rails as if in flight, achieving a faint urban dream spanning from the smooth concrete to the earthbound stars.

the residential district was ordinary lacking distinct recreational areas with only a lone shopping district near the main road, a maze with houses behind the walls casting shadows on the pavement, fragments of sunset litter the road as if fallen leaves, another end in the seemingly ceaseless summer days, users walk just a bit longer. in fact, many in serafuku uniforms populate this side street, their blurred passage made it seem like tohka was here but the architecture of their faces always erred from hers, instead her presence manifested in mere instances of recognition. chatter and users deciding on nightlife recreations eddy around me, nightlife began in after-hour gatherings at local pubs or batting cages despite the buildings not yet lit up into dazzling promenades. datasets and portrait inter-



faces overlap, weaving perhaps into the shapes that could morph a familiar silhouette.

at the end of the street, one of those girls stopped in front of me, her expression lacking emotion but in the way that her parents might have urged to get by unscathed, tohka creuset, standing there with her hair tied up exactly like her school photo still needing to do something in the coming night. i thought her appearance fortuitous but a slight pang of disappointment also formed.

‘what a surprise’

‘you know i’m not here...you know that?’

‘yes, i know’ the programs i had running couldn’t identify her at all, there was no user controlling her character. she was in front of me, her contemporaries, no, imitations wandered around us as if the sea parted to this elliptical spot, a tarmac eye where we stood at the diameter of its imminent vision, tohka standing before me now, her smirk lacking the shying from her reports.

‘you must have a lot on your mind to think of someone





like me and have that materialize...would you ask why i disappeared? everyone wants to know.'

'i suppose becoming an alterior being after a parental argument must be a pretty big flex, but that's not what i'm here for.'

'why, afraid to be disappointed?'

'no but people don't just up and disappear. that's cause for interest, wouldn't you say?'

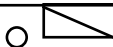
'well, i may not be who you think i am but i could be anyone! a student, an idol, an ideal romance. does there have to be something so suspicious about little ol' me?' she puts her fingertips together delicately.

'i guess i have high expectations...'

'so do i....' her gaze loosens as if i were only a glint from the streetlights. "i'm a fantasy, and the city was once filled with them, so...here, i suppose fantasy can be granted out of virtual signals, a dream come true...'

'so what is it then that you are supposed to be.'

'behind you' her voice whispers at my back causing me



to turn, we draw, her with the same polymer handgun as our arms aim their weapons to their target, our profiles matching to human-shaped targets. ‘perhaps, you would’ve preferred something like this?’

her smirk obscured by her pistol’s sight, its barrel a black hole, this case, another riotous conclusion, and tolled gunfire ringing in real or virtual space, that merely left us with whoever bit the dust and the wavelengths of electric signals or distant grass cycle. a foregone conclusion but hardly the end. she lowers the vp70 as i do mine but i realize the angle at which the weapon lowered matched mine exactly and it was clear that i was staring at a reflection, and yet her strained smile seemed to be the only transgression that escaped our motion, our impulses.

‘maybe we’ll see each other again?’

a user bumps into me and i turn only to see the phantom no longer there in the now empty street with streetlights dispensing moonlight into the pale concrete. turning back, one of the delinquents from the train stood a distance from me, wearing biker pants with padded knees and a studded jacket, the programs also unable to identify him. he stares before a little grin breaks across his once stoic expression, and disappears, logging off the server but no



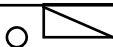


animation playing for his departure. the survey_program redirects me back to the apartment, the directory points to a door of a nearby house, the one with a low pointed roof, static wavers at the intersection and i hurry to the house, fearing a collapse of this space,

back in the corridors, signal returns and the inphography executable tracks no visible users in the area but myself, the halls clear with the tiles dripping in moonlight. the spectrograph detects no other sounds but an incoming signal from a blocked source forces its way through my encryption and appears next to me, a small twitch, whips the vp70 towards it, a chinese girl in maid outfit, round glasses, and braided hair with a glock 18 pistol in her hands leaning next to a door, waiting.

‘chihaya...’

chihaya was a maid both in occupation and dress, the tai shu kwong company using it to advertise for both entertainment, hospitality and assassination services, both going for the killer maid aesthetic. although its use was not only in combat situations but in relief as well with tai shu’s supposed escapades into flood damaged peninsulas. she mostly served her boss saturna, which was how she knew how to connect into the same server space as i de-



spite my prior fortifications.

‘a couple seconds was all it would’ve taken’ she says in a soft yet glassy voice, adjusting her glasses until the lens turned white, perhaps reflecting all possibilities of the situation in a hole of light, that her slender arm might have reached toward my wrist, subduing me before planting a 9mm round into my neck. tai shu’s security forces despite training in conventional military combat also had a rumoured cadre of kung fu masters and chihaya was a student of theirs, using her training to redirect an enemy’s strike before transitioning to the pistol, a combination of eastern marital arts and western cqb, her palm a deadly canyon all to lead into the recesses of where her enemy will be put to rest.

‘is that so? maybe i ought to give you a handicap...9mm rounds are pretty good at setting the stage...’

‘i’m afraid that would not be possible. i also have 9mm rounds, 30 of them in such a small space, you will have no escape and my 9mm will have no need to...officiate’ she said monotone, if not robotic as i feel the flat muzzle of the glock right at my stomach where the light armour was the weakest. ‘saturna would also be very sad’ she then picked trying to evoke some restraint at the mention of



saturna's sadness in a calculated attempt to diffuse the situation knowing that despite everything, i would try not to do anything to hurt saturna who once called me in a virtual parkway, the ends of her world and that those two points must exist like sun and moon do. she was always the poet in that regard.

chihaya brought it up knowing that would get me to at least hesitate. something viper would have called 'fucked up', as he held emotion and memory at some precious level not to be tainted in calculation.

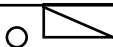
'you're right, though you don't need to treat me like i'm holding a hostage,' i withdraw the vp70 as she withdraws her glock 18, supposedly ending a cycle of violence, and sigh, 'what a useless exercise...so what brings you here'

'tai shu just launched a new character for one of its mobages and it's tohka creuset'

'really? what class is she?'

'mage'

'that's dumb. don't tell me tai shu actually employs soldiers to sell mobage characters'



‘master is waiting’ she said opening the door which already established connection to the moon protégé triad’s server saturna manages.

her server went through a number of changes based on certain motifs, one moment adopting a new roman pantheon aesthetic with marble columns in red lined up beside fountains, gold statues reaching out to paintings of the heavens to celebrate the theme of new riches of the orient or new prosperity in line with china’s rise as a global superpower in the 2000’s. this time, it was a nightclub with a dancefloor, neon glowing off a bar with glass shelves at the center where prominent bottles of wine and champagne deck the place with a kind of sophisticated flair akin to nightclubs in 21st century hong kong where many 30 something finance workers from central would gather celebrating new mergers or meeting lost loves behind the columns away from the lights and throbbing trance music. some users (possibly moon protégé triad members) tussle at some arcade fighting games which was a nostalgic touch both in its inclusion and some wayward metaphor about virtualized violence in a world of endless commerce, something only saturna would think of when she designed it. chihaya stopped by the table where saturna was, long hair swept to reveal dull eyes and sullen expression that some





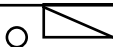
might deem a little plain if not unapproachable. dressed in a punk jacket and i can only imagine the graphic on the back. her gang in the moon protégé triads was a mostly on-line group that dabbles in crypto mining and, of all things, performance art in a newly established arts and culture division for tai shu. some of it might be a front for triad activities but she seemed to have mastered an art of the spectacle that made crime thrillers so popular, attracting audiences to the dynamics of underground violence and business rather than arguing about their morality.

‘thank you chihaya’ saturna glances to the maid before facing me ‘foxtel.’

parts of a rifle scattered on the table, a wooden handguard distinguished it as an ak47 variant without the stock akin to the late 20th century jewel thief from hong kong, yip kai foon.

‘you know you should invite me to places like this, i don’t get out of my room often you know.’

‘maybe, but look at you, going out, meeting new people. i guess now with virtual space you can do whatever you want from your room and you can have your self and the virtual self’ she smirks taking a cigarette and lighting it,



the ember from her lighter barely warms her expression. 'i hope chihaya wasn't too rough with you'

'quite uh...personable'

'we only held each other at gunpoint once'

'aww...finally getting along.'

'barely...' i sigh. 'so how's the work with tai shu?'

'honestly? fucking brilliant. i have to stare at goods deliveries from crineberg and their shell companies to know who it's going to and see if it's any interest to the corp. crineberg, obviously making a home for defectors just so they can say how shitty we are, like can they just leave us alone?'

'maybe mass executions of traitors, embezzlers, leakers and dissidents might help your case'

'i'm just saying, some people, just need to die. that's all'

'so edgy'

'right, i feel i'll finally out-edge viper, him and his being all 'i have to sell firearm even though i hate corruption





and evil, because it is world based on the survival of the fittest' like, what a little bitch. i could probably snipe him right now if he wasn't so adorable.'

'maybe, i know he doesn't like tai shu'

'what's he gonna do report me to hr?' she challenges since to my knowledge, both companies don't have either, only offering a meager counselling wing and a suggestions box which is either automated or left to someone to fill employment. 'crineberg mostly just annexes independent buildings and patch territories so i'm sure he'd know better than to side with them if he stands for muh freedoms'

'well, i guess he picked the high life, guns over the service industry.'

'aren't they the same'

'don't tell him that,'

'i won't. so, you're messing with 80 sects?'

'if you want information, then i'll need to be in your employ unless the nouveau riche theme last time was just a facade'



‘talk about a lack of initiative’ she chuckles knowing my inching for a business opportunity from her was in jest. she continues. ‘whatever the case, who would’ve thought that the rumours of an 888th floor are real. we might have to make that a new superstition’

one of the triad’s more famous rackets was actually spiritual guidance, mediums and others. while it might be called scams by crineberg and others, there have been compelling discoveries of spirituality and signs among the wired and perhaps the spirit world, such opportunity turning into its own business

‘so, how did chihaya know where i was.’

‘caught me.’ she puts her hand up before assembling the ak on the table, opening the charging handle on the receiver where she looks inside it. ‘80 sects traced that girl from the drug hallucinations to this building. and the fact she’s famous. famous enough to make her one of the stars in a mobage as well as be a character motif in the dramas on our entertainment division. 80 sects are marketing her drug-related appearances as, the hallucinated idoru’ she said the last part in a faux spooky way.

‘cheeky’





‘ms.saturna, i sensed a presence within that apartment, but it was not connected to anything nor is it the girl. thankfully, they broke their pursuit when they found out we would come here’.

‘right, there was someone who was following me in the suzuru server. they had no user id’

‘guess we can’t forget about 80 sects even though you’ve shifted your focus on the idoru’ saturna winks. ‘though, do you really have much insight into a girl’s turbulent heart?’

‘shut up, if you want to talk about empathy, perhaps chihaya ought to find another way to tell me about mobages’

‘i only react according to the situation and you seemed to need comic relief’ chihaya said deadpan.

‘quit bullying chihaya >-<’ saturna interjects. ‘anyway, your pursuer must’ve been a spirit from meditation. there is a way for people to access the wired without the use of virtual space but it’s difficult.’ the ak is near assembled with only the barrel and handguard to install almost a premonition. ‘all i’m going to tell you is that 80 sects is gonna notice you running around their storage rooms’



‘how kind of you to let me know.’

‘it’s common courtesy. 25 is the most detested number next to traitors for us.’ she references the cantonese pun for traitor sounding similar to saying the number 25 as a non-sequitur, or a tagline on the importance of loyalty and friendship’

‘who are they gonna send?’

‘always ready to jump into oblivion...perhaps you and that girl might have more in common after all’ she opens her hand, her slender fingers press on the square casing of a magazine from the g3.

‘red poles?’ i ask referring to the triad underbosses. usually much better armed than average 49ers depending on who their gang is with.

‘maybe.’ she tosses the magazine which then dissolves in the air, appearing in my inventory console a quick scan for any items lost, show that most of my spare mags are gone. ‘pick them up by the door and be careful. especially in this place of secrets where things exist and don’t exist, i’d hate to see anything happen to you.’





‘thanks’

saturna's eyes narrow but almost in a knowing glance before i get to the door where chihaya stands with a gym bag where i retrieve my things, the items reappear in my inventory, the magazines strapped within the jacket as the polygonal cloth adapts to the shape once again.

exit, the glitter of the nightclub frozen in the glazed corridor as the dance floors shrink into the concrete walls around me. equipping the g3 rifle against the waves of static, leaning myself into the stock as if pressed against a barrier mediated by the battle rifle, staring down the upper receiver to the front sight, a shadow surrounded by an iron halo.

new posts from the tohka rp account, pulling it up on an interface screen beside me.

5:00 i was told the real world was a scary place, always to be cheated and manipulated all in the dinner table, i only continued to eat, this world of eating and manipulating...

6:00 when will i ever be forgotten, it would be nice if that happened. i guess i'm my own container of me. i do not exist to anyone but myself.



6:30 but non existence is okay isn't it? i walked in a crowded square and there were school girls and salary people just like me and those things i wanted to be just blurred into these steps, walking in this faceless cityscape.

7:00 work school dinner eat sleep work school dinner eat sleep.

tohka, sitting at a table with the silent ruckus of the cutlery while she sunk her chopsticks into a clump of rice in her bowl so as to ensure this supposed solace. one that her parents would perhaps ask about what she will become in the future which elicited little but it seemed this silence only endured as if her silence had separated her from the world, perhaps as far apart as the commercials on the television set, an assemblage of notes and frequencies among aborted signals then playing at a speed she could no longer keep up with.

moving up to an intersecting hallway, i, peek at the corner, a figure errs from the wall, their presence was virtually silent, meditatively so perhaps all possibilities of our encounter may have been mapped in their brain which might coil into its intended action.

'i was wondering how long you would be staring off into





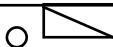
space' the figure turned revealing a strange mask, one with large eyes and a puckered mouth like a mythical trickster. the infography program failed to detect any signature. 'then again, a voyeur would dedicate their time in the act of the gaze'

'i don't know who you are or what you know' i replied, his mask within the sight of the g3, its features evaded the ring surrounding it.

'my men had a close eye on you in the suzuru district. you may be good at cloaking yourself in virtual space but your presence is here in the spirit realm is as naked as you were born. it is always said in our side of the world a person wears many faces' they said walking up until their mask touched the barrel of the rifle, the sound echoes through the hollow of the mask but it continues as if his face was a cavernous wake. 'so tell me, do you think this weapon will kill me?'

'7.62x51mm should be enough to open you up in more ways than one.'

'you're holding back...but you are just like her...the girl?'



i back up crouching my shoulder into the rifle's stock, one foot bracing behind as my nerves steel themselves hovering in wait for the follow up shots should i miss.

'yes, i know much about her'

'a spirit medium who works for the 80 sect triad...what would you want with tohka'

'i am merely a steward of this space. it's important for one to take care of...hallowed grounds...'

'hallowed grounds?'

'yes,' he enters a nearby door which opens into an empty industrial space flanked by concrete columns, the walls flush with packing boxes identified to be hallucinogens. i follow, keeping my rifle at bay for now. 'there are many ways now for an individual to reach transcendence now. hers was a mere anomaly. so in order to preserve records, even data, it would have to be replicated through re-transcription or memory as a person can wake up and remember things to a point that it's etched into their being, but then something happened. the memory was slowly rewritten, no longer conforming to its image from life and it became something else. it's a touching story'





'i'm tearing up at the thought'

'she was a mundane ordinary girl. even you can imagine what she might be like, and be correct. there is very little meaning to her existence but that futility birthed a new yearning and so tohka, the virtual idol was born, a new image that kept students hoping. she had found, her instrumentality'

'so you're saying her passing was for a purpose?'

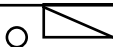
'everyone's pain had to amount to something'

'somehow i doubt that's what she wants.'

'this woman you speak of no longer exists. you ought to not play into the phantoms of your projections.'

my feet pivot on the floor, soles gripping the concrete as i pull up the rifle, the iron halo from the sight remains a moment before a flash consumes it, a stream of smoke spears past, the masked individual's hair flattens from the velocity of the 7.62x51mm round tearing past, concrete fragments fall from the crater on the far wall.

'sorry pal, guess as a no one too, that's exactly what i'd do'



‘hmpf, i had hoped we could solve your doubts but i guess i can just bury you into a perfect memory.’ the individual takes a sutra which summons a doll with ball joints, placing their hand on its round head. ‘they say that nostalgia is the opiate of the masses. things that don’t exist drive people over to an abyss. something i’m sure you’re familiar with’

columns shiver, in seconds the meagre colour from the lighting pales as the doll dashes, no, it seems to get close and all i see is an after-image before bracing my weapon which repels a force that hurls me backward, as i tuck in to fire only to have the shots phase through the image of him beginning to its next attack. was it using some kind of frame skip? an application that allows a user or an apparatus to appear as intermittent images which can obscure trajectory, or rather its full movement, making each attack more fragmentary.

i had no idea where the doll would attack next, watching some iota, no, even a shadow to telegraph its move but all i could do was run to the columns, the trickster still stood but i knew attacking him would be futile since his body composed no mass on the wired. my veins thrummed, throwing myself trying to feel where the next attack would

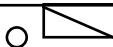




come, stepping back when it's a frontal swipe or using the rifle to block but i couldn't keep this up. i grab two grenades from my bag and throw, engaging the pins to toast the bastard.

prism columns mutate into clouds of smoke after a quick spark. electric signals bounce from the blast causing interference that threatens to sever the room's image as i part through ghastly ribbons, intervals between the doll's movements shorten, its appearances form a much more coherent attack pattern i can dodge. smoke slows down movement in virtual space as the effects take up a lot of memory if unoptimized.

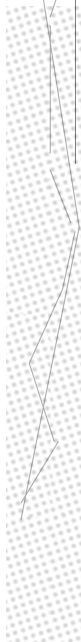
i flick my hands to send files to upload into the space, thousands of interfaces amass into puddle of data. the doll body stutters before lagging into its attack position on the side. rotating to position myself the columns collapse into a single concrete layer before i'm facing the doll ahead of me, afterimages struggle to weave as its once effortless movement broke into thousands of postures as i line them into a single silhouette, its contours sharpen in the thinning haze, rifle drawn, jolts into me as my shoes catch the ground, all interface windows dispel as the slowed round now slit across the wired, flicker of the iron halo and its



centered mast like the faint shadow of a target, my hands melt into this vessel of destruction, 7.62mm at a time.

smoke clears and i find the doll reverts into a paper person, its medium along with the merchandise had completely disappeared. not that i was going to report where their stash was but it was irrelevant. i only sigh, imagining the whole ordeal had evaporated like the air i just exhaled. waiting a while, tracing the two craters left from the bullet's impact which apparently went right through the doll, shells on the ground like discarded bells, their aborted paths embedded into the stone, a moment left the disfigured geometry until a simulation from the interface tracked the course of each round, these constant paths that would span and intersect. that was how the wired was born, using the trajectories of people to fuel the future all the while using all the connections from the various users.

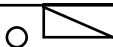
connecting to the main corridor, the survey_program found the main door had its access route cut which meant the trickster really was serious about burying me here. a stone coffin where i would be trapped in the contours of a body i would be unable to see apart from the limbs, its reach extends to the fingers, my sight ends at flat wall, my world cubic and unchanging.





nowhere to go, i proceed forth to the door ahead and enter a room with a soft light furnished with a bed, desk and bookcase which seemed like luxuries since some rooms, even in the real world, had less as they could use virtual space to construct furniture of any kind without worry of taking up real space. this was one of the few times i had even been to a room outside of mine as either i met people out in the city or on the wired. a closed space that condensed someone's essence and habits from the way books were arranged on shelves to the stationery decorated with cute characters, a t-shirt thrown on the back of a chair and plush rilakkuma bears, a mascot bear with beady eyes, sat at the bed, a city outside dressed in curtains, a theatre of all its iridescent streets, park lamps waiting on secret rendezvous, arrangements of traffic lights and pedestrians turning in sequence, the hidden mechanisms that conducted these lights up and down these wayward streets not unlike a computer, the information coming from unseen processors.

checking the room, the desk had a small computer which i turn on. after a boot-up sequence, it lead straight to the home screen with an email message without a sender. the text box opens with a blinking square typing, an automated voice reads,



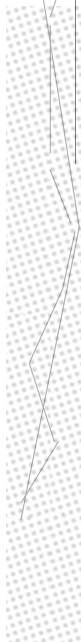
‘you’re safe now, the door will lead to the 888th floor.’

i look at the keyboard which takes me a moment to get used to as it had been phased out with cognitive transmission allowing thoughts to be typed instantly.

<i appreciate the help, i suppose you don’t know someone until they point a gun at you...’>

‘you really are just like me, floating in a state of suspension, surrounded by people who are so needed but us, we could only just be.’

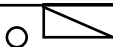
this was an odd interaction but it didn’t take me long to realize what she meant, that viper, kunakida and faux could somehow intertwine themselves within the smoothed connections of the wired, appearing one place, then another in the delocalized activities that bloom in utterly exterior planes, where they were already different people depending on the services they performed. perhaps tohka and i were incompatible with the mirages of these constant movements, crowds that don’t materialize into familiar steps, and we become utterly apart from it, from the limits of our selves, our world and the places and people we can no longer see going places we cannot follow.





i was in her room and i take the time to look at the record that producer gave me, corrupted glyphs remained but it seemed calm, each edge or undefined shape now seemed like droplets of rain whose landings on a hand startled a moment but never becoming unpleasant. this place must have been where she might have made sense of things for a moment, unbound by silence or compliance as she thought her self to be able, no, not even that she had potential for anything that counselors might try to lure her to be their greatest project of finally focusing her cognition into some productive flurry, but more that she could understand where she was, or that she felt that she could no longer belong in this world that was atomizing more and more into the wired, these walls and books and their phantoms were a remnant of that world and even her memories.

checking ammunition, i head out into the hall but the lighting grows dim as darkness obscures the floor. dampened walls suggest there's a presence here, the space illuminated by lights coming from hollow silhouettes, their unidentifiable bodies ripple in static ebbing across the grids of tiles behind them. electric signals struggle to materialize any texture or being, the spectrograph acts up with faint chatter whose words i can't discern from beings that elude



understanding. i walk through, always near a touch, half formed consciousnesses wash around me hushing even, as if they notice my violent intent materializing or the hand near my thigh holster, these silhouettes chatter perhaps about my presence, trespassing on their dialogue already too fast, filled with some nuance or wit i cannot follow, forming another kind of noise; the noise of an approaching consciousness as their thoughts might form into language out of the vague sounds they produced.

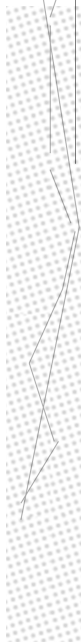
“were you waiting long?” a voice. tohka’s. and i turn around to see her in serafuku with a smile. it’s not her. the ghost crowd around me barely acknowledge her existence. i try to id her but nothing comes up.

‘where should we go?’ i ask.

‘hm, well this is virtual space, we can decide on wherever right?’ she beams in an artificial way, the notes of her voice to elicit some tributary smile.

‘so what’s happening here. a hallway’s hardly a place to hang out’

‘you’d be surprised. pedestrian thoroughfares have a lot of people who stop there to watch.’ she walks ahead, brush-





ing her hair aside with the back of her hand. ‘besides, this is just a ritual beginning. try scanning them.’

using the infography program, the silhouettes only give fragments of data, occupations, offenses, partial names, the ui of the programs has lines sweeping each of them as if tracing frequencies, an ever eluding surface.

‘the hallucinogens have transported them to this space, they think they can reach me like that.’

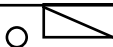
‘you? or the v-idol’

‘hm...i don’t know...i’m a student here and i’m someone else in suzuru right?’

‘different faces?’

‘something like that...’

?tohka? opens a door that leads into a quiet area with a backroom of multiple mirrors, a different angle as if a lovely photograph never to be seen again, different costumes of serafukus, blouses and attendants hung around the room from the gridded ceiling akin to a new inspon design choice of a dressing room having all the costumes suspended by hangers on the ceiling and making a medita-



tive choice not by clearing the mind but by their collective gathering that inspires a new thought. behind on a bulletin, there are photos in a pile of old beaches and coves that probably don't exist anymore due to the previous century floods, the seas that once glimmered of our forlorn dreams that fell upon the once modern world.

but walking past her costumes that flutter near her, mirrors tracing her every step until she reaches an empty stage, its hardwood floor ends a little bit ahead, dropping off into a void of electric signals, perhaps someone could peer in from that unseen space.

'is there a concert?'

'sort of, there is a performance today though.'

'alterna?'

'yep. call this a parallel space' she said sitting down cross legged and her hand reaches out as an acoustic guitar materializes. she plucks a couple chords on the frets and strums almost in melody before she stops and starts again. 'do you think i'm stupid?'

'huh?'





‘you know, disappearing. i mean i just couldn’t see myself in the world anymore, or you know...the world in general. i don’t know when you were born, but our worlds weren’t so different. but why...’

‘no, i get it...’

‘what?’

‘we’re supposed to be like normal people, yet why are we never like them, why can’t we just fall comfortably into it. i guess we’re not like people with trajectories or courses... only destination’

tohka’s eyes widened and a trace of her apprehension seemed to dawn on her before a smirk rises out of her with a chuckle.

‘idiot, don’t go showing off’

‘sorry’

‘hmpf, i guess i’m like the apocalypse after all’

‘what? what do you mean?’

‘you have a record of me, right? now that i’m here, that re-



cord means nothing to me, i've just created my own reality
by being here.'

'whatever you say.'

'you're a cold one,'

'so we have some things in common, there's not really
much to say'

'no, i mean, a cold one,' she whispers beside me, hovering
near my face before back of her hand gently claps against
my cheek, the impact was enough to dispel any sensual
tension she might have intended.

'wow, now i know you're not her.'

'hmp' she stands up. 'was i supposed to be? this is virtual
space, every signal has the potential to sculpt anything, it's
honestly pretty scary'

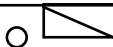
faint shuffling and whispers bathe the space and an after
image of tohka steps forward, lights glow from afar waiting
for her nascent flight, her song that might pour from those
reserved lips. these notes soft as if from a dream, one that
turned her still feet into jaunty leaps even twirling a mo-
ment between these unseen stage lights, another sun from



a world where time moved from these slices of light, raising its arms to a spotlight to hail to the falling sparkles out of the darkness, before sashaying to the sweep of a skirt, the v-idol's steps throbbing against the stage floor as if a quickened heart, the cheers of her audience breathe air into the space. yet despite the virtual amusements elsewhere, we were still here in our empty stage hearing these fragments yet, the dance, it always stepped close to where ?tohka? stood as if they were movements that despite their speed, perhaps tohka could step into and follow into that person she may have once thought of in turbulent desires falling through shreds of idol posters and beach cove images and virtual spaces that would dissolve as she fell on her bed limited by her world.

vague machines whirl from the void and ?tohka? cuts a look to the side before three screens bloom in front of her, a group of armed men packed in body armour toting assault rifles and breaching equipment ride the elevator, time at 12:20 trying to get a piece of the 888th floor experience. infography program identifies them as a group of silk road mercenaries affiliated with 80 sects, all armed with hk416's and mateba revolvers holstered at their thighs.

'visitors. their psychic interference might pull us into the



888th floor again.'

'should we fight them off?'

tohka only smirks. perhaps a strip of delinquency remains in her jaunty body, the after-images of the idol dances and its hand extends to the side and ?tohka? reaches for it as a light envelops me and the ground i was on that softens until i no longer perceive it, floating in a way that somehow has me trying to tread water in void until i hear the distinct reel of a chain and gear turning below me fishing me into a scenic residential district with low electric signals leaving a faint hum off powerlines on this little sidestreet, these threads that might unravel into fantastic images, while someone in a hoodie leans on my back as my hands grasp the handlebars, riding a bicycle with tohka sitting on the rear fender rack. an interface appears in front of me showing the elevator's arrival, the mercenaries disembark with guns drawn, turning to notice they have reached floor 887 still brim with the faint doings of sleepy residents from behind the doors. the mercenaries gyrate their arms as if to shake out their disappointment whilst arguing why they were still within the real world.

'heh mil-fags' tohka chuckles and i realize it was a different speech pattern, much looser if not melodic, until her





shoulder softens into my back as if about to sleep. 'i'm still
tohka, don't worry.'

'right, like that ever worked.'

'so you don't believe me? i guess only a normalfag might
fall for me'

'right? nobody acts the way you do'

'acts? i'm a real being you know?' she pouts. though she
did seem like a real being from her heft leaning onto me or
her snickers that might withdraw into a wistful look, her
eyes that toyed with the city light. none of what i thought
of her, or even knew of her could at this moment even
could trace her near lethargic breath that concealed all
the things i would never know of her.

'between the points of an ampere lies a soft pool where we
might inhabit our intimacies...'

'where did you learn that?'

'uh...nowhere'

'c'mon tell me!'



‘hey now it exists in a greater form cuz i didn’t tell you!’

‘you’re so stupid!’ she sticks her tongue out at me. ‘i hope a bullet enters your brain’

‘maybe you’ll have to inhabit my dumbass later...’ i chuckled and even found the prospect interesting. to be inhabited by such a playful spirit but the fact she was able to manifest an interface in a place with such low bandwidth was surprising.

the district soon flattened into a large rural area sudden enough to make me slow my pace biking if not for the sky spilling off the house roofs vaulting around us tracing the globe unlike the mesh of connections modelling a sphere but rather its blue filled everything comforting enough so that even its dust of stars gave us enough light to go by.

tohka motioned for me to stop as she walks ahead, half sinking into the tall grasses rolling with the sudden wind picking up, my jacket even flaps to the side, as my feet sink a little into the earth as the silence fills with the brush of grass against the night air almost akin to radio interference.

‘what is this?’

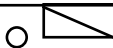




‘this is the festival.’ she turns to me as grasses part to her presence. ‘now if you may’

the cryptic way she framed this made it difficult to understand her intention as she stared at me as starlight flickered casually across her face that brought its distant warmth in this dim prairie. it seemed then i thought of what i could do, sensations that might pulse to propel me towards all spilling against my contours, my reach only could extend so far and so did my sight finding its horizon that could split earth and sky where things might disappear to within these howling fields now forming a frequency of half collisions, blades of grass chafing against each other as the scene forms its own shapes, our world finding its ends and all of it being momentary. a second, the wind relents to allow the field to stand, another, the blades coalesce into a tawny yellow from afar as if daylight fraying under sky becoming picturesque, and the next, i brace into the stock, cresting to the upper receiver beamsing toward the iron ring and its centered thread.

sounds of the field erases from the shot’s transgression from their hushes, the bullet’s trail dissolves into ribbons of smoke that unveil a broken sky held together by this destructive mass of light, kaleidoscopic branches grow from



this sudden break as the sky no longer reflected us or even became a picture with some significant hue but that it was the fragments of an entirely separate plane whose air tethered us between the frequency of steps and heartbeats, crevices formed veins coursing the bright iridescences contorting out of unseen light in sudden play that founded our momentary flights from earth, inside them i caught flickers of tohka which would then diverge into another branch forming a new route mapped in the evening, each tohka in their own route, some as instant as lightning or meander even intersecting each other in moment but all of them held together these fragments of sky. even the wires from the road traced her route in a gentle kind of wavelength from each antenna that once siphoned information across miles, fathoming the gravity of the world. it was on streets or on the wired, where the contours of her self could erode and she could emerge out of her fugue, a little lighter as her steps could propel her forth, a little uncertain yet tracing a route only she knew.

?tohka? looked at the display and shrugs saying that it should do.

‘now i think you ought to tell me who you are...’

‘oh? i guess i haven’t said anything about that have i? she



said as her features began to fade, a full moon grew from the hole in the sky of its various craters, its luminescence left only her silhouette visible as it places its hand over its mouth in haughty gesture. 'i am kaguya, of the moon and this was simply a tribute to this girl or rather, the interior of her being,'

'even for a divine being, you sure know how to make an entrance.' i said half in disbelief for the almost tawdry way she introduced herself

'but this is the beginning'

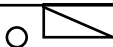
'of what? i don't quite follow'

'virtuality. the reason the wired is so potent is because the electric signals are conduits of potential. anyone could be anything across it, the line between the real and the virtual becomes ever more blurred. even when i became a being on the wired, she could truly become who i wanted to be, part of it was because she wished it, and another, well...'

'and someone doesn't want that to happen?'

'perhaps...or maybe there's just one thing left.'

'what?'

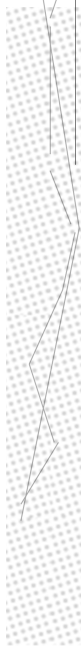


‘the final door’

it was at that moment she belonged in a world entirely apart from mine, one that’s vague with only inklings of a sensation that carried them across the electric void that knew no ground, only the thought and its psychospheres imagining our places to meet.

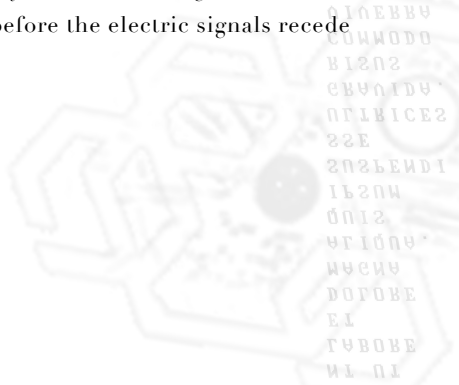
‘it’s only a matter of time until virtuality completely consumes everything around it. if people back then said there was no need for the wired, then now, there may be no need for the real world’

soil begins to give and i find myself falling, faster as the scene before me dissolves and where kaguya stood was only a white screen diminishing until i’m surrounded by darkness. i nearly laugh, thinking that this must be some kind of elaborate game, the play that kaguya or tohka took in this alleged floor that despite its mundane architecture was a trace of her everyday, where fragments of her, or who she wanted to be flickered in the streets among friends or betwixt her nerves, it didn’t matter if she was just a normal girl but that in our courses, we were always a proximity apart yet close enough to shorten, just a single turn or a step toward but still allow ourselves to part in these wired thoroughfares. soft motion buoys me upward,





my bones fade in against my flesh like the lights in a room
that have just turned on, before the electric signals recede
into sleep.

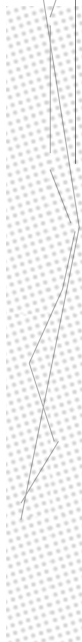


LASCIGISI
AEG
TACIS
VCCNWSN
VCEMUS
CINERBY
CUMMOD
BISUS
EBVUIDV
UTLWICEZ
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SUSLEWDI
IBSNW
ONIS
WIGONV
WECN
DOROVE
EL
TUBOVE
WELPI
INCIDIDN
LEWFOR
EINSMOD
SED DO
WE ERII
VDIBISCI
INB
CONSECTE
WEL
SIL
DOROV
IBSNW
TOREW





2
LWCIGI2I
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2VM
MPECENV2
GILNEBVV
COMWODO
B12N2
EUVV1D4
N11V1CE2
23E
2025END1
1B2NM
0N12
V11D4
MVEV
D0G0VE
E1
T0B0VE
M1N1
1WC1D1D0
1EM10V
E1D2MOD
2E1D0
WE1E11
V11B12C1
10V
COM2EC1E
VWE1
211
D0G0V
1B2NM
T0B2M





IT'S A GOOD THING the DARK LORD is a shut in!

by: [baroquespiral](#)

Name: Ymaññ Ulwen

Sex: male

Occupation: [Taboo Preserver]

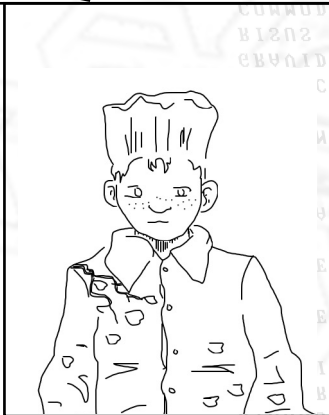
Theme song: Burach - Born Tired

Likes: free time, bristly fur, grid layouts, musical improvisation, imaginary numbers, lavender tea, unconscious magic, cinnamon, chess

Dislikes: arguments, repetitive magic, long proofs, tomatoes

Blood type: AB

Seen with: dogs



The third [Taboo Preserver], YMANN ULWEN was a popular streamer (improvised music and experimental magic) before retreating from the world to become take on his role. His streaming career, which began at age 13, ended in an acrimonious feud with another streamer, an older woman named Kruhai Shelsynn. The details of this feud have been erased from all networks, including ecclesiastical & military, in exchange for

Ulwen's co-operation. Ulwen's sleep and psychological magic compatibility scored third highest in a gauntlet of tests conducted in 4151 AH, two years before the reincarnation of the Dark Lord, breaking all previous records including those of previous [Taboo Preservers]. Ulwen said the following explaining, in an unscheduled interview, why he wanted to take on the sacred role:

"I mean I want to say it's out of duty to civilization, and I also know the rumours that I'm not supposed to say duty, that candidates who say duty are rejected - I won't get disqualified if I admit to knowing about those right? Everybody knows them. So you can doubt my honesty in either direction. But it's really not about duty first, or maybe that's what I think about first but not what I feel first. I'm turning 18, and people tell me I don't know what I want to do with my life, but I think I do. I'm told I have potential in the Magic Academy, but I don't think I'll accomplish anything great. I don't think I'd be able to handle accomplishing anything great,



and if I got close to accomplishing something great I think it'd slip away from me. Of course, I don't have to, but on the other hand, looking out at another sixty years or something, and it seems like too much work, an unbearable amount of work, not to accomplish anything great. Not just the work work, most of that I'd probably be OK with if I got a job where I'm able to decide what I'm doing, but the people work, the expectation work, the letters, the conventions, the academic feuds...

The recruitment letter warned about aging rapidly, but I feel like I've already aged prematurely, when I talk like this. I need to say that because in a person my age everything I'm saying probably sounds like depression, which I'm sure is a red flag for you. But I'm not sad, I'm not even not feeling anything, I feel full and at peace and wistful and terribly afraid something's going to shatter it all. I understand that something could shatter it in this position - if things go wrong - but that would mean something, and I really believe I could face it with dignity, if everything else was right with me and around me. I don't want to be disturbed,

but I don't think I'm a coward; I want to keep playing, but I don't think I'm childish. When I'm just playing around with things, I feel close to the Goddess. The Goddess is perfect order, and I feel her, right there in me. I know that's weird to say as a man. I understand you haven't had a male [Taboo Preserver] before? Whenever I have to reach out into the outside world, to express any of that, I feel chaos. The serpent-God. And I'm not interested in chaos. It's also in me, and it creeps up on me and tries to devour me every time I'm not thinking about something. I just want to think about things, and not chaos kinds of things, not me kinds of things. I want Her. I want to devote my whole life to Her, as she appears in me. It's a little embarrassing to say but I want the comfort you're offering too. And I can't see any kind of life that lets me do that the way this does. It doesn't bother me that I'll be asleep. I'm with Her when I'm asleep. She is the spine of my dreams. I'm content to climb up and down that spine, forever."



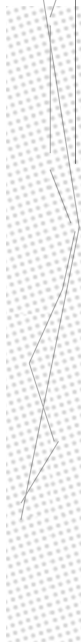
it's a good thing
the DARK LORD
is a shut-in!

Synopsis

luskonneg remains dormant by a curse and a conspiracy, social peril, online conflicts and miniscule destructions litter the interior of the small Pandora's box of his life, a hidden cornerstone on which stands an unstable world.



2'
LWCIG121
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM20M
WRECE02
G10EBB0
COMW000
B1202
E000100'
011BICE2
23E
2026EAD1
1B20W
0012
01000'
W0000
D000E
E1
T000E
M101
1WCID100
1E000
E102W00
2E100
W000E11'
001BICE1
100
COM2E1E
0W01'
211
D000E
1B20W
T000E





cw: intrusive thoughts (violent, suicidal, sexual), masturbation, pornography, child sexualization, sexism, authoritarian government, confirmed delusions, psychological manipulation

His stomach growled in his sleep.

His eyes opened unconsciously, and grey-blue afternoon light washed out the dream like a chemical spill. Eventually he looked up reflexively at the computer screen next to his head. It was black, and gathering dust.

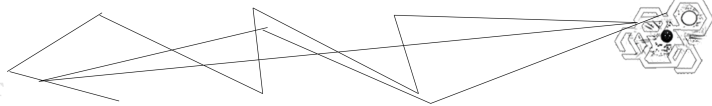
He pulled his arm tingling from under his stomach and waited for it to unfreeze to press the nearest key, squinting.

As the screen came on, his eye zoomed immediately in to the network connection indicator in the top corner.

Still empty.

FAILURE 01: BLACKOUT

2'
LVCIF
AET
TUCN2
VCCNM2W
WPECENW2
QINEBVQ
COMWODQ
B12N2
EVBVIDW
QIVICE2
23E
2026END1
112W
Q12
V10W
WQEW
DQOKE
E1
TQOKE
W1Q1
WQCIDW
LEWQW
E12WQD
2E1 DO
WE E11
QDIB12C1
1W
COM2EC1E
QWEL
211
DQOQW
112W
QOEW



Frantically toggling the connection off and on, he watched it stay the same as it had for three days now.

Three days he had mostly spent sleeping.

That was what he did, when there was no reason to be awake.

Madness, he had heard, was doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. But they kept clicking - on, off. Madness wasn't the worst thing in the world.

Going to sleep again - wouldn't that be just as mad? He'd done it what, six, seven times? Every time thinking, it doesn't really matter when I wake up as long as there's a reason to be awake.

But what if there never would be?

What if the world was trying to tell him to go to sleep and never wake up? Die, he subvocalized every time the little exclamation mark appeared in the indicator - it felt like getting waterboarded. Die. Die. Die.

He screwed up his eyes, gritted his teeth, scraped at the skin on his forehead and wrists and cheeks, trying to wake up from the dream.





Red-faced, he rolled over face up and stared into the milky light swimming around the bare ceiling. He wasn't going to be able to fall asleep like this, but his mind was at least refreshingly blank. It was sleep, just white instead of black. Frozen panic instead of melted peace. Faces taunted from the walls creeping up around them.

Maybe I just haven't appreciated what I have, he thought, rolling over into the bearded crotch of the scummy skumizu of Slina, the Magical Algae Girl, the poster peeling away from the plaster enticingly, his hand creeping below his waistband. It felt good like this against three layers of weight: the underwear, the pants, the blanket.

But every time he started to feel something, he'd start thinking again - what if I never get to see her in another position? The transparency of the image - the effort to maintain it - would become obvious and the energy would dissipate.

The feeling in his stomach, however, hadn't dulled in intensity or left his attention once since he'd been awake. It had more object permanence than some limbs.

Even more than anxiety, it was the incontrovertible difference between this state and sleep.



Normally, Luskonneg had groceries delivered. He only ate once a day, and sometimes skipped, so it was easy to live like that. Lately, planning several days' meals in advance had made him too anxious so he didn't even have anything in the fridge.

Of course, the app he used to order delivery ran on an internet connection.

How long does starvation normally take to set in? ...even an hour awake like this was looking intolerable.

When the emptiness swirled like this in his stomach it was like reality swirling inside him, a primordial nightmare. He dreaded standing up. But somehow he did.

He checked the front of his pants for obvious cum stains. There was a fleck, days old, that would probably be no more visible than a crumb, but at the sink he rubbed it out with hot water and hand sanitizer. A sharp diagonal wrinkle snaked around his left sleeve, but it wasn't worth changing his shirt for that.

Scanning the tiny room for one of the shoulderbags he'd last used years ago when his social anxiety had been less crippling, he settled for the envelope a set of art books



had recently arrived in to protect his laptop, the part of himself that was more important than himself, his lich's phylactery.

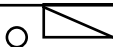
The door didn't beckon. It repelled. The closer he got to it the more unwelcome thoughts popped into his head like randomly generated enemies: Kill yourself. Use it or lose it. You're grounded. Crawl back in your prison cell and die. You were never fit to leave the womb.

If he closed his eyes he could almost visualize them moving towards him, and imagined them like bullets in a danmaku. He hopped one way and another imagining himself trying to dodge them - I wonder if I'll look this crazy out there - and banged his shoulder on the corner of a shelf.

In this room, he could simply crawl away from the point of transmission. Sit with his back pressed to the hard cabinets under the sink, even, so he wouldn't have to look at it. But outside, there would be no such point. The air itself was a miasma of flitting thoughts. A psychic minefield.

He focused on the pain in his shoulder as he turned the doorknob.

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Commissioner Braz put down the glass firmly, almost as if screwing it into the black mahogany table. "OK it's been nice to do this again, really, but if I drink any more I won't be able to remember what I was here to say, don't think you're gonna pull that one on me. The polls are showing frustration with the Ley line failure - up to 70% dissatisfaction with our response. Third- and fourth-class communication frequencies are still out as far north as Fools' Goldmine. The numbers are much worse in the privately owned papers than they report to the ecclesia, although they're less reliable so I won't pass on any rumors. My guys can't get anything out of your guys so I had to come here myself. What gives?"

The Colonel-Inquisitor, who had drank with the Commissioner before, and perhaps fancied himself more likely to under other circumstances than he in fact was, had been caught in civilian clothes. He fidgeted on the low and ratty beige couch, out of place in the standardized splendour of his wing of the barracks-rectory, facing the wide colonial grid window that framed the Commissioner in her uniform. She always looked intimidating, but especially in her uniform. The navy-blue officer's tunic, which in its peacetime cut went down past its knees, its platinum snowy owl insignia shining on her collarbone, fit tightly



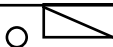
but not revealingly, just stretched and distorted enough to suggest the six feet of martial perfection beneath. The black felt jacket draped her broad shoulders and hung around her like folded wings. It had the same natural, almost geological way of sitting on her as her sandy hair's sharp sweep across her forehead, hanging down straight behind her ears to her shoulders. (It had been short the last time he'd seen it, but she never grew it longer than this.)

"You're still letting those bastards run their own polls? ...well, with all due respect, I think that's your problem, Commissioner. We didn't even have any mages working on repairing the civilian utilities until yesterday. Everyone's still working around the clock just keeping the area locked down, and on the investigation before they wipe their tracks. Even mages with no military training have been drafted into the effort."

"Goddess. And your people still won't even tell me exactly what happened." She sighed, and sat up even taller in the chair.

"That's part of what we're trying to figure out."

"Oh come on, don't give me that line - do I have to col-



lect on the debt you owe me for telling you what General Shaïgnar thought of you before your interview?"

The Colonel Inquisitor choked out a startled laugh. "You'd waste that on this?"

"I'm really worried." Her face was still incongruously gentle. "Nobody's been talking about anything else around here for a week. I'm not going to have anything more worrying to spend it on in the foreseeable future, am I?"

"We'll see. The cultist infiltrators were targeting our weather temples - if we hadn't shut down the Leys when we did your Winter City would be on the brink of an ice cyclone worse than in 3290, let alone the carnage they were going to trigger down South. We need to know if it's only the one, but we're just beginning to grasp the scope of the shapeshifter problem now too. Intelligence estimates they might be 12% of the population in the strongholds of the Dark insurgency by now."

"In Stirnia? I was sure that was Shaïgnar being paranoid as always."

The Colonel Inquisitor's voice hushed. "That warehouse we found and torched - they were rolled up in cubes and





stacked from floor to ceiling, I've never seen anything like it - would have been 3% on its own. So if we assume they didn't put all their eggs in one basket..."

"Do we have to assume that? It's one thing for a successful colony to have gotten full of itself, but for them to be coordinating on that level would put them on war footing."

"They were coordinating. The Dark terrorists and cultists who pulled off that attack didn't just use them in the attack itself, they'd been sharing information with them for months, maybe years beforehand. And it's now confirmed that Antinomians and Black Mushroom Initiates were working together on this. Shaïgnar thinks they might be privy to our wargames and acting in accordance with them deliberately to trick us into thinking they were ever in conflict at all, now hopefully that's him being paranoid."

"Wouldn't there be some signs in the census, surveillance, plainclothes operations? 12%?" She had slumped back down and quietly poured herself another drink.

"We're installing blanket CCTV with facial recognition in affected areas, hopefully that'll catch some, especially if we synchronize the data with cell phone tracking. But it's not like when the commoners lived in villages. It's normal



now to see hundreds of people in a day and never see them again... even our memory mages can't process all the faces. Who knows who's real and who's not, in a crowded modern city?"

"How bad are the polls on mandatory state phones?"

"The ones we're putting out are about at 50%, but we can't get the real results above 43."

"Are you telling me a hundred thousand shape shifters can wander around the streets and nobody notices, but add seventy thousand to a poll and they'll start wondering what's up? Things are as bad as you're saying and we're letting the lay synods and the burgher media hold our balls like this?"

"I mean, ignoring or suppressing them would amount to acknowledging war footing ourselves. ....don't look at me like that, you've read the holy chronicles. Black always moves first. The forces of good are always at a disadvantage when the Dark Lord rises. The question is how big."

"How far do they have to escalate for this for it not to be worth it any more?"



The Colonel-Inquisitor shook his soft halo of taupe hair, adjusted his glasses, twitched his mustache. “Much, much farther than attacks like this. This is how they want you to react. That’s what ‘terrorism’ is. It’s more terrifying than just being at war, it pushes and pulls and shakes you so you can never settle into that ice-cold do-or-die clarity. It makes you constantly look over your shoulder, impatient and paralyzed at the same time... it’s their own version of what we’ve done to the Dark Lord, one could say. But as long as they don’t have him, they don’t have their biggest advantage. The kind that could wipe out everything we’ve built overnight and reset us to zero as a civilization.”

“I know, but...”

He had expected to look bad in front of her, talking about all of this, but couldn’t say he wasn’t enjoying how the dynamic had shifted.

“And if open war breaks out, keeping our lid on the Dark Lord becomes exponentially harder.”

“Shaïgnar told me once we either have to be loyal to our civilization, or loyal to the war.”

“That’s Shaïgnar being paranoid.”



“...I hope.” Commissioner Braz downed the rest of her drink, posed her chin on her hands. “And do we still not know what the attack itself was? What did they do to the Preservers?”

“Some kind of psychic attack. It’s something we haven’t seen before.”

“Haven’t seen - ever, or?”

“Not since the Warring Era, at least. Academically, whatever, I mean, of course we left a few interns to sift through dusty old documents on that stuff, but it’s not worth it, we don’t understand half of our own magic from then, let alone theirs. For all strategic purposes, it’s new.”

“Can you guess how powerful it is?”

“You mean - would it work on him? On the [Taboo]...?”

Braz nodded.

Of course, if Braz wanted to get involved, it had something to do with the [Taboo] Preserver.

“You have to just think of it in common sense terms. The only way to know if it’ll work on him is to try it on him.



Even whatever data they were able to gather from an attack like that, they don't know if it'll work on him. And if they try something on him, we'll know and we'll move fast." He frowned. "This attack itself, it doesn't look... fast. The Preservers had been calling in sick, shaking off premonitions, etc. for a couple of weeks at least before this. So we'll be more careful."

"You got any more specific descriptions than that?"

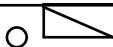
"My investigators will email you in a couple days, they're still scraping together everything they can." He looked up.

"Look, whatever it is it's powerful but it's not that versatile. All that time preparing and it only knocked them out for a couple of hours. There haven't been - any signs of complications, aftereffects. The Preservers are back and doing their jobs again, better than they've been in months."

"Yes. But with him, a couple of hours is all it'd take."

But Braz hadn't managed to hide the warm, relieved smile on her face.

It wasn't the kind of smile one smiled at the safety of something as small as the world.



2  
LVCIG121  
AET  
FVCN2  
VCCNM2VM  
HPECENV2  
G1NEVBV  
COMMOD0  
B12N2  
EVBVIDV  
N1BICE2  
23E  
202BEND1  
1B2NM  
D012  
VRIDNV  
WVENV  
D0FOVE  
E1  
FVB0VE  
W101  
1WCIDIDN  
1EML0V  
E102W0D  
2E1 DO  
WE ER11  
VD1B12C1  
10V  
COM2EC1E  
WEL'  
211  
D0F0V  
1B2NM  
F0VEN

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Down the birth passage that was the narrow stone hallway hung with classical allegorical tapestries, as if passing through the earliest memories of social indoctrination, to re-enter the world that had rejected him on those very terms - and then he opened the outer door to a riot of competing whites and greys. Stepping outside his row-house he immediately avoided the sight of the cobbled tenements on either side of the road, the wood-shingled roofs starting to fall into disrepair and patched up with board and tin, and angled his gaze into the sky, where drafts swept dustings of snow up and away like curtains. Someone almost backed into him as he stood there - a worker backing out the same door he had just left (how long had it been?), heaving an old stove. He pressed himself against the wall muttering "sorry" for about a minute until a strange calm came over him, and he looked down and examined every face in the street one by one, looked away as methodically, and began to move.

Winter City - the crown jewel of the northernmost of the seven kingdoms, Elthazan. Not the capital of Elthazan, that is, but its most beautiful city, its most famous, its oldest, its most modern, its richest, its most holy, and its most

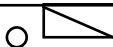




geographically distinct, lying above and below the cliff of Palluna, the upper and lower town connected by filigreed funiculars and the never-ending Winter Waterfall, whose majestic force surged into the Whitewater Fountain, then was diverted by underground canals and captured by the sacred jacuzzis, underneath downtown's beautiful and foreboding green copper domes, like a ring of hardy northern mushrooms.

He hadn't seen any of that since elementary school. For the last five years he had only on a few rare occasions, such as this, had to venture as far as his destination - the coffee shop at the end of the street.

Which was something of a classic Winter City building, even something you could show a visitor. This neighbourhood wasn't without its charm - no neighbourhood was in Winter City. It occupied the small circular tower, topped with a flat, ever-so-slightly convex copper dome, that rounded off the end of the rowhouse on the other side of the street. (His own rowhouse stretched around the block so its similar "head" tower was located on the perpendicular street in the opposite direction, and housed a chess club.) The three floors inside were laid out around a cast-iron spiral staircase which coiled up through the centre.



Light from the dome's skylight (magically cleared of snow) streamed down through the airy gap.

He almost bumped into somebody on the way through the door, and his glance flitted around the room, expecting everybody to be staring. He couldn't very well turn back now. I am a desperate man. He imagined himself as a rogue like Yogne, holding up taverns because his family had been ostracized for serving the Dark Lord. 'Don't I deserve to live?' - No - Yogne hadn't been to blame for his great-grandfather's crimes, you are entirely responsible for turning into the shambling waste of space you are. But he couldn't stop. He was on autopilot.

He tried to let his mouth water like a wild man as he looked at the menu. Blueberry mousse cupcakes, flaky spiral pastries with honey glaze, mint glazed snowflake brittles, juniper mochi, white chocolate and berry bran cookies~! But he was actually hungry, and needed a real meal, like a good quiche, or a zaatar, or - since when did they have lasagna?

He wanted all of them, and he wasn't going to come back here again who knew if for months or years, and knew if he didn't choose the one he really truly most wanted he would be regretting it for Goddess knew how long - he had





no idea which, but would exactly as soon as the money was out of his hands - even if he picked the right one you'd regret not eating the others, he told himself, trying to reduce an absolute distinction to one of degree (one that like most distinctions of degree, like the distance between the door and the counter, he could outright expunge by forcibly not paying attention to) - but that didn't help, now he didn't dare move and collapse that crest of regret that would instantly wash away all the anticipation of eating, maybe even the taste itself? (things like taste, touch, none of that ever felt as strong as regret, fear, envy unless it was this raw hunger, the closest he knew a physical condition to come to what he regarded less as an emotional than an existential one, and even that was now stalemated) -

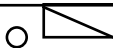
"Sir?"

How long had he been standing there?

He made the mistake of raising his eyes.

The eyes of the barista flashed into his like a big cat's on a moonless night, close enough to close the distance in the same instant as the jaws of dark.

They felt themselves move - anything to get out of the way



of those beams.

“Sir??”

They were back in the doorway clutching their collar around the flesh was that heaving up around them hot and cold.

Someone glanced back at him - at least one - but most of the still blurry silhouettes seemed to be looking, at least, to the front of the line.

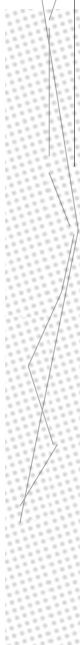
I have to get out of here. Do I even know any other places. Wandering the street, at this point, would just give his feelings more time to build up. If I do it fast - if I don't look -

He glanced at the glass of the door, transmitting the light of the street.

It seemed to shiver in the light, as if beckoning him to break it.

No no no no no. Not this.

He stumbled back towards the back of the line. Just do it fast. Just don't think. Whatever you do, don't think.





He closed his eyes. He played three anime openings in his head, in line for line and hex code detail. He didn't know he had got to the front of the line until the next "sir".

Just - point at the first thing you see when you open your eyes.

He forced his eyelids half-open and tried to read through the blur.

"Chocolate matcha..."

Hey, isn't that like that legend about the hero who said he would sacrifice the first thing he saw when he came back from fighting the Dark Lord, and the first thing he saw was -

God will find some way to punish you if you don't make your own choice you know.

What could God possibly do? It's just a...

He examined the shape. That demonic spiral, like a unicorn's virgin-goring horn...

(Wait, that's not what unicorns do, that's just in that one guro doujin. No, don't think about that before eating, no, wait, wasn't that about a guy's firstborn-



Fuck-

It's happening)

"I'm not going to let my firstborn daughter choke to death on a chocolate matcha corneeeeeeeeeeeeeet!"

...wait. Since when am I going to have kids?

"He'll be getting a lavender latte and a Has'qarn Delight," came a voice from behind him.

"And a spinach burger!" the shut-in blurted, voice escalating in seconds from barely audible to abrasive, closing his eyes and clutching his computer to his chest, pulling everything tight then gradually unwinding to pull the money out of his wallet. His last 20, all at once.

Even he couldn't resist a glance over his shoulder at the angel who had rewarded his heroic non-choice.

Six wings, wheels, fire, shifting-coloured eyes,

Eyes.

At 'eyes' a wave of impossible warmth rolled through his entire body.





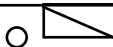
He blinked again.

A woman.

(Luskonneg was bisexual, technically, but had made him-
self that way largely out of fear of women.)

A 3D woman. That's not even the same thing.

There were pores around her nose. On her nose, too. But
on either side, on her cheeks, in a place where they were
slightly sunken just over her cheekbones, two small wings
of black pores were immediately visible. Like tunnels
into another dimension. Like burrows for worms of white
paste (he remembered, how he remembered...) They were
giving him tryphobia. He couldn't stop looking. He
looked away and they started appearing on the walls. And
her eyes, her eyes also followed him to the window, so
much smaller and narrower than he was used to, but they
needed to be for protection, for they were not just vul-
nerable, in the way a 2D girl's doe eyes were vulnerable,
they were vulnerable and disgusting and reaching out of
their sockets to be pulped, no get a hold of yourself that's
disgusting, and in the moment he thought the word 'dis-
gusting' he saw them in 2D, pure, beautiful, the light that
had struck within him when he had first made contact



and before he had looked away from the focal point of the pupils projected as if onto an invisible screen in the air, in greater detail, subtler modulation of colours, more startling rhythms of shards of crystalline starburst and bubbles of dew, than anyone, any of his waifus - and then he saw himself smashing them to red pulp, over and over, everywhere the screen was projected around him, which was everywhere he looked, and when he next blinked he kept his eyes shut.

But are scent, the weight of proximity and emanating warmth, dimensions- ?

“You’re... together?”

(He only remembered this line being spoken hours after the fact. And then suppressed it again.)

He didn’t dare look back to see her nod. He stared straight down at the counter, and hand trembling, held out his card. With internet down, he hadn’t spent anything on gacha in the past few days, so he could splurge. He would have paid... at least \$50 before making himself argue with a stranger, let alone a woman in public. (Would he really... speak up and defend himself for just 60, 70 dollars?)





The ration card beeped. He flinched. He had forgotten it was that loud.

And people were desperately whispering in the line behind them but he couldn't pin words down.

Luskonneg scooted over to the side of the bar and waited for the spinach burger. The woman sidled up next to him. Her hand pressed backwards, white-palmed against the countertop. Of all half dozen ways he could murder her he was too weak to succeed in any of them. That gave him the relief to look back at her but not her eyes. Her hair was chestnut-coloured and fell like blinds.

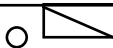
"I meant... we were together. Not that we were going to pay together. Sorry, I was in a bit of a rush. I wasn't expecting you to pay."

"...are we?"

That would have been the simplest thing in the world to say.

Indeed, he had decided to say it, by the time she had finished talking.

He just had to make sure. That decision had been suspi-



ciously easy, hadn't it?

Too good to be true.

He iterated his thought process two, three times. At the same time a subprocess of his mind was trying to count the split seconds in the ticking of dust in the shaft of sunlight.

No, it worked. Although if you're still missing something...

Right. What tone was he going to use?

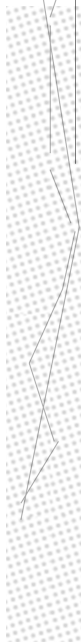
That subvocal creak at the back of his throat - booming in his ears - that was no good. That's not possibly going to produce the tone you're thinking of.

Try again. He swallowed. How long had it been? Her hand had been on the counter, now it wasn't.

He opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

Come on now.

- no, but he had to keep it closed, or what if nothing came out again, it would look like he was flapping his mouth like an idiot? Or if the words did, it would look like he had started and stopped before saying them, which





would ruin the tone, ruin the impression, which would be about the same thing. You should wait... thirty seconds.

In thirty seconds, he realized he had no idea how to speak in that tone. He had never produced it in his life.

He wasn't sure he even remembered how to speak any more.

What if his voice came out sounding like a bestial growl - a croak - a cackle - a burp - a sneeze -

The thought made him aware of everything in his nose. The air was a minefield of motes of dust.

He opened his mouth to speak, and sucked them in.

He wasn't producing any sound.

He hadn't decided on a sound to produce. But his mouth was moving. Shit. That's - exactly the wrong way to do this. But he couldn't force a note from the back of his throat, because the moment he began, he felt something move in his nose.

"Are you OK?"



He redoubled his efforts and immediately felt like the inside of his nose was being stabbed with tiny jacks. The air coming up from his lungs took a sharp detour and he barely had time to raise his hand before spraying - not just vapour but, to his horror, a whole slug of snot in a clear arc down to the tips of his shoes.

She had taken three rapid steps back and avoided all of it. "Sorry. Said I was in a hurry. I'll uh, pay you back some time, OK?"

His mouth opened and he staggered a titanic half-step in her direction.

Wait.

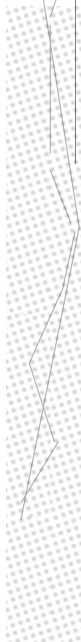
She was smiling. Smiling, right?

He'd actually made someone smile! He couldn't ruin that now. And couldn't expect anything else.

Out of this interaction, or frankly, this entire cafe.

Every part of his mind was aching, but he would have to settle.

He turned back, afraid to look at her smile too long. His





hunger was suddenly all-consuming.

He scanned for the lavender latte and Has'qarn delight.

The warmth of the bag under his fingers was as satisfying as the warmth in his pants at the start of a god-tier doujin.

He could have eaten every spinach burger in the cafe.

Speaking of that warmth, he could feel the tent in his pants, which was currently facing the counter, at least away from anyone looking.

He scurried to the nearest unoccupied table, not even thinking about his internet connection.

The table was a slab of rounded, worn wood that had been glazed several times; streaks of caramel grain in gold.

His erection wasn't just uncontrolled; it didn't feel in any way like part of him.

He hadn't time to form any attraction to her outside a paradox, but it had reacted to things he hadn't even had time to think about, things he hadn't felt or seen since middle school.

(He wouldn't be able to look at women, even 2D, even lo-



lis, for what, weeks now? He'd have to pivot hard to fem-boys...)

Why did he still have this middle school part of his body.

Why hadn't it just dropped off and been replaced by a new thing, like a deer regrowing horns.

There is a doujin about that, isn't there?

He had a nearly irresistible impulse to look it up here in the coffeeshop.

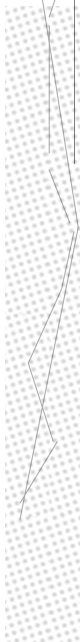
After all, he could hardly look like more of a freak.

Had he done all that on purpose? To set up some sort of force field between himself and people?

He couldn't imagine any other way he could be sitting here without tearing himself apart.

Even knowing how little he cared about their judgment, he couldn't imagine himself, in its absence, not caring about their judgment, more and more unbearably every time he escaped it.

But anyway the internet wasn't working here either.





The burger was so good it made him dread returning to the old routine of takeout. Well, I don't know when I will be. I don't know if the internet is ever coming back. Maybe I'll just stay... do they let people sleep here? ...it's a cafe not a church... and it'd be easier to go back home than go to a church. What could happen in a church? Maybe a cute nun finds me and takes care of me... now I just wanna read *My Bedside Nurse Is A Visionary Mystic?*! (there's no way the real thing would be as good as that, it'd have to happen exactly like that, and it wouldn't (I'm pretty sure 'being mistaken for a vision of the God' is my fetish, but it only happens in this one doujin, Goddess!)... or even just *Bleeding Heart Sisters*... don't churches have a special intranet? maybe they'd let me on the intranet, if I just used it to look at something like that... do any nuns read *Bleeding Heart Sisters*?) The burger had been sitting in his hands for about a minute.

It's like there's nothing to time my thoughts to, around here.

Anime, music, even the rhythm of clicking page by page through a comic or a web novel, it's like those things situate me in time and my own mind. Otherwise he got overwhelmed trying to process the rhythm of several con-



versions, his own chewing, faraway footsteps, passersby walking below the window, and his own thoughts, time itself jumping from one track, one measure to another and his own thoughts, unmoored in time, spiralling into their private infinities like dreams where a day can pass within a few minutes of waking - shit, was that another minute, wasn't it.

He had the sudden, vivid, nonsensical vision that the burger was rotting in his hands - even though he knew it couldn't, or they wouldn't sell it, but -

You're wasting your time. You don't deserve this burger. Time is rotting it.

And his eyes stared deep into the ragged edge where his spit was softening the burger, like a fly's -

Something rose up in his throat and he had to close his eyes and lean back and breathe.

This is why I don't like to look at food while I'm eating it.

And now he could feel the judgment of others again. As concrete as time - as if they were staring at their stop-watches and timing him.





They were talking.

What are they talking about? Is it me? Listen, see if it's:

Teenagers above him:

"It could have been worse, power was out on my uncle's farm. He always says they shouldn't have so much magic concentrated in one big station like that."

"My mom was yelling at me all dinner for saying it was a Dark attack! Calling me a conspiracy theorist!" *sigh* "she's not gonna apologize, of course. But like, man, is it even such a big deal if I'm a conspiracy theorist? She says it like I'm a thief or something!"

"It's not even a conspiracy theory? It's a reasonable assumption at this point, like, the censors didn't even put a disclaimer on that article in The Valkyrie claiming a new Dark Lord might have reincarnated ten years ago. We should be expecting stuff like this at least. And they should."

"Do you really think... there's a new Dark Lord? There's gonna be a war?"

"Well, it'd be easier to buy that this new magic for sealing



the Dark Lord is a game changer that'll keep him sealed for good this time if they hadn't said that last time. I was reading primary sources for my history assignment..."

"They say they've already successfully suppressed one."

"Would they even know it was the right one? The Dark Lord's never been suppressed. The only way we know it's him is that there's a war every time. I dunno, I think it's one of those things that just happens, like people dying."

"You're too chill about this, man."

"I'm not chill about dying. I worry a lot about dying, that's why I can be chill about everything else."

"My mom has a spell subscription for her headaches, it's been down and she's just gone straight to bed after work the last few days."

"Oof. That's awful, hey I'll pitch in some credit so you can get a nice potion for her."

"Really? Thanks so much bro..."

...So was that why the internet was down? Some kind of Dark attack on a big magic station? That would do it.

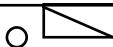


Goddess.

A weird sense of self-worth washed over him, and after everything that had happened in the last fifteen minutes, he took the time to savour it, tuning out the strangers' conversation (which would have inevitably taken some other triggering turn).

I might be a pathetic shut-in, but at least I'm not a Dark cultist.

He had somehow never gotten this from his own parents, but (despite the internet being heavily censored, and Dark cultists mainly recruiting through the criminal underworld, which he was too much of a coward to dare venturing near any place associated with) lots of otaku on forums would always complain about responsible adults in their lives, after an event like this, sitting them down to ask if anyone had been talking to them about... forbidden magic, or secret religious teachings, or how the world was unfair and corrupt. "Of course I can see why you'd think that, life is tough sometimes, honey, but you don't... think it would be better if the Dark Lord returned, right?" Because the Dark, everyone knows, preys on lonely disillusioned young men who haven't achieved anything remarkable in their lives and give in to despair.



Well, that's how a normie would see it. That's what they would assume because they don't understand it from a shut-in's perspective.

From that perspective, the Dark cultist has no idea what despair is. No matter how much the truth is staring them in the face, they'd throw out their very humanity to hold on to the belief that there's some hope in this world. Even if only for themselves at the expense of everyone else. Even at the expense of civilization and all the achievements that have given them everything worth surviving for - anime, manga, fanart, video games, pop idols, fast food, toys, memes, anonymous online banter without any of the pressure of maintaining control of your voice and heart-rate or being identifiable by a name and face if you say something embarrassing. Anyone expressing the slightest sympathy with such a view wouldn't be given the tearful intervention they might get from bleeding heart relatives at home. Screencapped, spammed with gore and the most disgusting fetish porn that was still legal (fuckers probably like it), banned on sight - by the mods if not by the government censorship algorithm.

From a shut-in's perspective - from the unanimous (undoubtedly heavily censored, but who cares) consensus of





the textboards, imageboards, blogs, forums and chat rooms
- Dark cultists were the worst kind of riajuu.

Self-centred, self-important, overdramatic, chuuni emo
whiners - the epitome of cringe.

Even basement dwellers need someone to look down on.

There was nothing in the world someone like Luskonneg
would less rather be.

The thought of someone he was better than was giving
him the strength to finish his burger.

He sighed and looked back down into his hand. Eight
bites left to finish.

Now that he could count them, time them, it was as good
as already over.

One-one-thousand, something in his head had started,
two-two-thousand-thousand, three-three-thousand-thou-
sand-thousand...

He felt something crawling on his scalp but when he
touched it there wasn't any sweat. He looked out the win-
dow to see if the sun was in the same place. He bit down



experienced in the past four months - maybe he'd go up there and try to talk, after all, hadn't he almost? Wasn't he desperate? No humiliation could be worse than just sitting here awake focusing on the empty gravelly brilliance of his consciousness.

Of course he could. But then he knew what would happen. If it was just for the sake of alleviating his boredom, the mere act of thinking about it would be enough. He could sit here for hours (minutes) not only contemplating what to say, but spinning whole conversations in his head out from it, branching paths like in a visual novel; or if he stood up, deliberating every single step, every detail of his expression, stopping halfway up the stairs or at the top pretending to be absentmindedly looking for a washroom, how long a wait would disqualify him from approaching, and how he could approach again if he disqualified himself. He could do this forever, and the forever would be infinitely longer than the last forever. It would be just as agonizing, but it would be exhilarating, more dramatic than any anime or game ("life is being a hero of RPG game that has undecided purpose", the poorly translated slogan from a Stirnian doujin circle he had scrawled over and over to a manic density and eventually scratched out, ripped up, burned with cigarette stabs on his high school



notepad), sickeningly more, especially since it would never have to end. Life was the only media addiction he had ever given up. Standing, waiting, perfecting, rejecting, refusing, running away, watching himself run away. Even now he was watching it. Watching himself decide whether to move or not. So simple, so stupid, binary, 0-1, yet infinitely entrancing, single-bit video game. And he couldn't stop it any more.

You could just die.

Live, not live. Die, not die. 1-0, 1-0, but this metronome was almost calming.

He closed his eyes.

Patterns bloomed and wilted, opened and closed, in dry blue. This is the world I belong in, he sighed noiselessly, and the sweat from his palms settling on his forehead. Why can't I stay.

After an undefined time he opened his eyes.

Looked over to the screen, dim and fresh as afternoon snow. Smacked refresh.

A loading circle appeared in dull blue, crawled brighter.





He sat transfixed, welcoming the thrill even if were to prove a false start. Is it... for real?

As colour and text dropped across the window, he almost cried.

Then immediately minimized it. There was no-one behind him, but he didn't even want to project a page that lewd at the window.

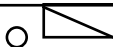
Smacking it shut. Time was moving normally again. He let almost violently large breaths in and out.

Looking down he saw he still hadn't finished his burger. He swept it up in its wrapping in his other hand to eat as he strode.

So briskly, so confidently, maybe he even looked cool. But he wouldn't ruin the feeling by looking at anyone's faces looking at him.

He couldn't even feel, hear anything around him, except the sunlight, radiating pure energy or information like that which was at his fingertips yet again.

Not even the conversation above him continuing, "shit, I can't transfer you the credit, internet's still down!"

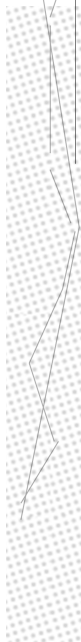


Rairihha Braz, Commissioner of the Paladin Guard for Elthazan, pushed through the white curtains, layer after layer, until she almost doubted herself and thought she had gotten lost, tangled up - and that was always when she broke through into the skylight of the sanctum, a single drop of nervous sweat disappearing into her wide and crooked smile of relief.

She looked down serenely at the young man sprawled on the round bed in his innocuous pink-and-blue tartan pyjamas - before her anxiety jerked her eyes out of their repose and up at the dogs.

They gazed down at her with their stony blue marble eyes, heads imperceptibly and inscrutably swivelling.

Corpse-thin and more than three times her height, the [Taboo] Preserver's guard dogs towered more like white fir trees with their branches folded against their trunks by a heavy snow than dogs, narrow cones bristling with points of hair as sharp as hedgehogs' quills, their peaks collapsed in proboscis-like borzoi muzzles drooping downwards. Every time she came here, she thought she had gotten used to them, and yet -





A pull from the bottom corner of her coat. She shook her shivers out through her shoulders and looked down.

Normally, the [Taboo] Preserver would sleep in sacred robes adorned with chrome feather filigree and embroidered with curves representing the highest and subtlest equations and paradoxes, but this one - Ymmañ Ulwenn - preferred the fluffy felt pyjama shirt and pants that ballooned around his legs and slid around his neck and collarbone as he pushed himself into a sitting position with one hand, pulling at Braz's coat with the other. She dropped, as if a spring had released, into a squat next to her bedside, and with one hand reached out to pat the Preserver's mint-green hair.

A little over a year ago, this gesture of affection had had to be cleared with a half dozen high ranking scholars, magical jurists and political authorities. The fact that it had been at Ulwenn's direct request had made the process significantly easier than it would have been otherwise.

"You have no idea how long it's been," Ymmañ rubbing his head back and forth against her hand until his hair started standing up.

"I think the last time I was away for the same amount of



time.” The last time she had seen him had been shortly after the attack - not as shortly as she had wanted, when she’d thought the [Taboo] Preserver might have been targeted somehow.

She felt at least one dog’s judgmental eyes on her. ...what?

“I have been busy, though.”

“How was your sleep? Did you get any?” Ymmañ started with concern.

“How long do you think I can go without sleep?”

“As long as you want! You’re a cool Commissioner with a ninth degree magic seal.” She narrowed her eyes more seriously. “As long as I can go without waking up.”

“Yeah, see for that, it wouldn’t be enough to be cool - I’d have to be a Taboo Commissioner.”

They laughed. There was, of course, no such thing.

If there was, Braz would probably be it. But you couldn’t just make up jobs as important as the most important job in the world.

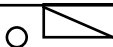


Preservers of some form or another accounted for a 45% of jobs that had stayed stable for about three generations. Even the most sophisticated magic spells did not naturally last much longer than the action of casting them. Ongoing spells supporting something like a power grid, or a network connection, or many other modern amenities required a Preserver (or many, depending on the spell's strength); someone performing an ongoing ritual to maintain them. On a well-established circuit, Preservers could be cycled in shifts, making the elaborate, efficient magical technology of the modern world possible. But cycling introduced vulnerabilities - like the ones the attackers had probably exploited - vulnerabilities that couldn't be allowed in the most important spells in the world.

The [Taboo] Preserver's job was to maintain the spells that kept the Dark Lord at bay.

The history of civilization - of order, and peace, and the worship of the Goddess and the Light - was a history of struggle against the Dark Lord.

4000 years ago - all calendars were reckoned from that date, and all time before was a muddy prehistory - the seven great heroes defeated the Dark Lord and freed humanity from uncounted ages of slavery. Their Golden Age



lasted three centuries before the Dark Lord was reincarnated; thus began the Warring Era, a millennium of siege, the descendants of the heroes unable to kill the Dark Lord before he reestablished the Dark Kingdom but just barely managing, for generations, to hold its forces at bay. The few times the Dark Lord was killed in the course of those long and fabled wars, he was immediately reincarnated within his own line of succession in the Dark kingdom, under a magical procedure only understood by his priesthood. For all its brutality and unpredictability by modern standards, the predictably relentless violence of the Warring Era and the stability of the Dark Lord's lineage brought with it a sense of constancy that would prove beneficial to the humans, who learned and evolved to match their enemies until finally the Holy Alliance stormed the Dark Kingdom, killing the Dark Lord and exterminating his priests.

He would not be born again for another thousand years. In the First Dark War that followed when he was, all the cities and temples of the Warring Era were razed, libraries burned, millions massacred, and humanity brought closer to total subjugation than at any time since the beginning of written history.

In the second interval of peace, detecting and if possible





preventing the Dark Lord's reincarnation became a priority of the Ecclesia. A partial emulation of the spell used by his acolytes to control his reincarnation was achieved, and the next Dark Lord was detected at birth. A special task force - professionals, not heroes - was dispatched to kill him in the cradle. All measures to do so - or even capture him - proved impossible. His immunity to magic, overwhelming innate abilities, and a significant measure of intellect were awakened the moment a hostile spell was cast on him. Fortunately the child Dark Lord was less powerful than his previous full incarnation, and the Second Dark War did not reset civilization to zero. The next peaceful era would become more advanced and prosperous than any before. Magic users harnessed the power of the Ley lines to build a power grid that fuelled mass communication, heavy industry, rapid transport that could shuttle people and resources around the world, and widespread advances in computing and robotics.

None of this gave them any protection against the next reincarnation of the Dark Lord.

Or that was how it appeared to everyone except the cunning General Martolod. Martolod looked to the neglected, but inexorably growing non-magical sciences for a solu-



tion. He found one in the new and controversial science of psychology, which claimed to break down the different faculties that made up a functioning mind and the fragile equilibrium they had to maintain. The spells he had his mages cast on the Dark Lord when he reincarnated were technically buffs, and thus not blocked by his many immunities. But by strategically increasing his suspicion, anxiety, negative perception, conscientiousness and sensitivity to a degree that they couldn't be balanced out by other traits, they hoped at least to make him ineffective as a general and uninspiring as a leader to his own Dark minions. They were even more successful than they expected. The emotionally stunted Dark Lord they created did not come into his powers until he was forty (and homeless), twice the age of any previous Dark Lord's awakening, and when he did he killed most of his own forces in a paranoid fit, taking only a single city with them before committing suicide. By the time he reincarnated again shortly after, the formula had been improved. Martolod's team had requested access to the mass media. Soon the cultural authorities whose role had been to select the most aesthetically sophisticated, morally and philosophically serious art for public funds and distribution were turning a blind eye to and even promoting hyper-addictive products that encouraged unrealistic fantasies, harsh disillusionment and

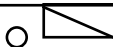




social isolation. Crucial social supports for mental illness - better and more widely available in this than in certain other universes - were mysteriously withheld. The Dark Lord reincarnated over and over, as routinely as he had in the Dark Kingdom. He was now on his fifth failed incarnation; the last had been the first to die entirely without incident, starving himself to death in a manic episode in which he hadn't drank water for three days trying to beat a record in a visual concentration game.

Throughout all this time, the Dark forces, however, had kept building up without their master, and increasingly, over the lifespan of the current Dark Lord, seemed to be learning to self-organize, taking back sections of the former Dark Kingdom and launching insurgencies deep into the heart of the Seven Kingdoms. The "Dark Cold War" inaugurated by General Martolod which humanity had been inarguably winning had transitioned into a "Dark War on Terror".

No matter how weak they made him, they couldn't aggress him directly. Keeping him under surveillance and occasionally engineering circumstances indirectly was the most they could intervene in his life without triggering the Dark Lord's magical defences and self-awareness - which,



based on psychological models of past incarnations of the Dark Lord, the longer he maintained the more he would recover from the psychological handicaps placed on him.

As well as maintaining his psychological limits, the [Taboo] Preserver was entirely responsible for the surveillance. They were, in fact, the only person in the world who knew who the Dark Lord was - the sizeable committee that had been tasked with predicting his birth and casting the spell that the Preserver maintained had all been mind-wiped so that they didn't even know they had participated, though some could safely guess. The information was too dangerous to risk being exposed by some bureaucrat in an attack like - well, the one that had just taken place. Everything the Church and the Kingdoms knew about the current condition of the Dark Lord came from the reports of her dreams the [Taboo] Preserver delivered involuntarily. The [Taboo] Preserver only woke when the Dark Lord was in a deep sleep cycle, and when they slept they dreamed his entire life, including his own dreams. They spoke in their sleep, dictating significant events to an enchanted notepad in complex formulaic language which exhaustively classified types and levels of potentially threatening thoughts or behaviour without giving away valuable specifics, unless a breach was significant enough to merit an emergency re-



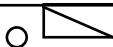


port. More subtle observations they could report at their discretion in one-on-one interrogation - although that was like remembering a dream; they didn't have continuous conscious memory of the Dark Lord's memories, since that could risk causing them to identify with him and tailor their information accordingly.

When he was awake Ymanñ hardly thought of the existence he had sacrificed the vast majority of his life to contain. He thought of his dogs; the luxuries provided by his servants; the exquisite beams of the skylight; and the attentions of his occasional visitors, sometimes an Academy doctor, sometimes a distracted ecclesiastic or politician delivering a perfunctory prayer for TV, sometimes Commissioner Braz.

His face - significantly magically preserved, and made up like a movie star's by his servants - was beginning to show some of the lines of his actual forty-one years - although in waking years, since he'd been chosen out of the Magic Academy at 19, he was little more than 22, the same age as the current Dark Lord himself, and a dozen years younger than the Commissioner.

White hairs camouflaged themselves amongst his sea-green ones, never standing out, never more than one



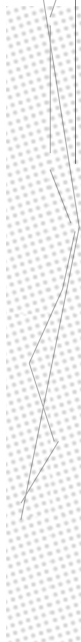
standing alone. Reeds among grasses.

He had a boy's softness and a man's softness, and it was impossible to tell which was which.

Commissioner Braz had at first thought everyone found this combination as uniquely poignant as she did.

"H-hey Rraihha! Look at these!" Ymanñ shoved a pile of papers towards her.

Braz picked them up and sifted through. Normally the only papers she looked at here were the original drafts of the reports on the Dark Lord - if she suspected her briefings were missing some detail she was interested in, not that anything in the Dark Lord's life was ever interesting - but these were drawings. From one page to the next they demonstrated sharp improvement; the first few were somewhat self-awarely shaky, baggy, outlines, adapting rapidly and returning to form when a shoulder or finger ballooned out of proportion, the lack of internal detail or shading except a few aggressive scratches for emphasis here and there contributing to the sense of weightlessness evoked by the extremely light pencilling; confident and accomplished outlines began to appear over eraser smudges. The last was a portrait of a face, the outline only





suggested by its heavy shading, blotches of sickly front lighting emerging from an exhaustive chiaroscuro with haggard features receding once again. It was a ghost's face - a face that would be circulated in chain emails attached to constantly shifting backstories that never quite managed to live up to the nameless unsettling quality it evoked, that you'd pass on against your conscience in superstitious hope that it wouldn't keep haunting your mind hours later. Except in this context, the explanation was horrifying enough.

"You shouldn't... be showing me that."

"There's no rule against showing you a drawing, technically. And if anything goes wrong, and he uh... you should know what he looks like."

Braz nodded grimly. The possibility, he supposed, didn't seem as distant now as it had a few weeks ago.

But still - "when did you draw all these?"

Even in the 2 hours or so they were awake per day, the [Taboo] Preserver's freedom was severely curtailed. They couldn't go outside, of course; they were also forbidden access to the internet or any mass media except a classi-



fied public servants' news bulletin, and any cultural pursuits that might overlap too much with the Dark Lord's interests, promoting identification. The role of [Taboo] Preserver was understood, in religious terms, as a kind of ascetic calling - the opportunity for a brief, hyperfocused life of austere self-awareness sold as one of its perks. And while previous Preservers had deviated from this from time to time (the last had been an enthusiastic student of classic literature who had written several essays respected in their fields and, according to private ecclesiastical records, an equally sophisticated wine taster), Ymanñ had embraced his role to the fullest; his pyjamas and liaisons with Braz only seemed to demonstrate that he didn't need solitude or ceremonial vestments. His life of single-minded prayer, inexhaustible attention to his guard dogs (the most pampered in the history of the office), and occasional composition on a toy synthesizer were enough. The simplest man in the world.

("If the Dark Lord could live like me," he had told her, the second or third time they'd met, "he could be happy." And his tone - she remembered it like a recording - was of bottomless desolation.)

"They didn't tell you." His voice sunk - more audibly than



he had allowed it the last several times he had had to intimate her emotions. "He's been asleep virtually the entire time since the attack. His internet was out. It's been...I forgot what it was like, being awake for this long. I wasn't ready. Don't be sorry, it's my fault. I didn't think something like this would even happen." He laughed - and sounded his age. Or was it a kind of overtone - a resonance between what a twenty-three-year-old and a forty-year-old would sound like, unique to this specific situation? "In, in this place - like, it's beautiful, it's meditative, but not for this long."

They both looked apologetically up at the dogs.

"No, it's funny," he continued. "I just forgot. I used to kind of hope for something like this to happen when I signed up for this job! And then I slept so much I just forgot about it. Forgot to prepare for what that was like. And the anxiety, because of the attack obviously and I don't know what effect it's gonna have on him if it goes on this long... I probably would have been more up for it in the Academy than I was when this hit. I would have made the most of it, I wouldn't have wasted it on..." she ruffled the drawings - not roughly. "All this shit."

"They're beautiful," Braz reassured. A shadow shifted



across her nose as one of the dogs nodded. "I mean."

"I know. Just..."

"And I'm sorry I couldn't be there..."

Ymanñ reached out and touched her wrist. "It's not... missing you didn't make it worse or anything, right? Just so you know."

Braz looked nowhere, hoping she wasn't blushing.

Then Braz looked down at the documents in her hands. Expecting simply to mull (involuntarily - he didn't enjoy it, in a situation like this, but he would) - over the shock she had been through. Instead, there was something more shocking.

"What the hell?" Braz's eyes darted over the documents. "Outside his apartment for... three hours? And... he talked to someone?"

Ymanñ cringed, and laughed. "Nothing happened. I'm sorry."

"I mean, you didn't have anything to do with it!" The [Taboo] Preserver had no power to affect the taboo individual





whose life they dreamed, even if they were lucid in their dream. All their magic energy was occupied maintaining the spells. Any such effort might kill them - and then all hell would break loose.

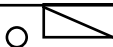
Braz sighed dramatically. "Goddess. Goddess. Maybe that's what they were aiming for? Maybe that was the point of this whole attack? - sorry, I'm not looking forward to Intelligence seeing this, but I shouldn't worry you. You must be already worried."

Ymaññ screwed his face up in a curious frown. "Sometimes I don't know if I know how to worry any more."

Braz skimmed momentarily over the paradox of his statement. "That's good. I don't get it, but... if you've figured out a way not to worry in your position, that's like, the Holy Grail."

"Did the others worry?" Ymaññ asked briefly, earnestly. His eyes pierced the Commissioner's soul like raindrops. He wasn't allowed to access the records of the other [Taboo] Preservers (this one had never even made sense to Braz).

Raihha read and re-read over the report. "Went to a cafe



- Containment got him hooked up to our backup network in under twenty minutes so he could go back online - went back home.” She exhaled with involuntarily audible relief. “Well, if you’re gonna apologize, I guess I better congratulate you. This thing we’ve got, this system, it really works. It took all that effort to get just one thing to go wrong, and they’d have to break down so many more.”

This system that brought me to you.

This system that took everything to you.

This infinitely bittersweet system.

But everything in the world is bittersweet.

That was her mantra, the affirmation that let forbidden thoughts waft away on the current of all things, the current of the Goddess’ will.

That’s what someone like the Dark Lord will never understand. Everything in the world is bittersweet.

Well, what she knew of the Dark Lord from Ymanñ’s reports.

Most people just laugh at them. But he really is something





scary. Something incompatible with a human, something incompatible with the human world.

And Ymanñ has to live with him all day in his dreams.

“Take them, huh?” Ymanñ held out the pictures. “I don’t necessarily want them around here. And I feel like you’ll appreciate them more than I do.”

They’d remind me of you. They’d only ever remind you of...

Braihha nodded, gripped the edge of the stack, but couldn’t resist frowning a bit.

They’ll also remind me of what you’re tied to.

Can I imagine you separate from the [Taboo] Preserver? Separate from the Dark Lord? Can you?

Do I have a right to?

Quite literally, in a legal sense, probably not.

And as simply as that, the thought dissipated into a feeling, and blended into the others - loyalty, admiration, affection, I...



That's how a human works, she thought grimly, staring down into the drawing's somehow accusing eyes.



by: [Amara Reyes](#)

Name: Emelry Sainshand

Birthday: April 8th

Sex: Female

Occupation: Ilion haruspex, lieutenant role

Likes: Weaving, solitary study, woodwinds, citrus, birds

Dislikes: Arrogant personalities, open spaces, the dark, cold foods, tea

Blood type: AE

Seen with: The other five members of her law ship's crew



A young woman hailing from the more provincial regions of Ilion's territory. Having completed her education at the legal academies of Saniasa, one of the wheel's largest settlements, she is a new but nonetheless fully-fledged haruspex. As the primary enforcement body of the outer system, Ilion's Office of Haruspicy is responsible for maintaining ethical, legal, and spiritual standards across the region.

Raised in a very small and insular town, as many of her countrymen are. Religious by necessity, but more superstitious than pious. Very invested in her choice of career, and not since childhood has she considered a life outside of it. Well-liked and sociable, but has few close friends and even



fewer real confidants. Focused, persistent, and impatient, with a strong sense of charity underlying her demeanor.

26 years of age and three feet, eight inches in height. Has the buzzed black hair, translucently pale skin, and violet eyes that most members of her species (*homo dharmae*) share. Large purple birthmark covering her left shoulder-blade.

inquisition file



2648. For a thousand years, humanity has been at a nominal peace under the theocratic Ecumene of Heath. Once a global power, its influence has grown apace with expansion into the heavens, and now spans the entire solar system. Borders still persist, both political and cultural, and are codified in the archdiocesan system. Originally, each continent and the holy land were administered by an archdiocese, ensuring a level of self-determination and autonomy while still being tied to the jurisdiction of the Ecumene. Since the advent of space colonization, several additional offworld archdioceses have been established to maintain influence in a new paradigm of corporate powers grown so large as to become legitimate states. First of these was Hightower Habitat Solutions of Lune, the first and only manufacturer of rotating habitats, home to the majority of humanity. Second was Delphi, energy brokers still constructing a dyson swarm around the sun, which since its founding has superseded the three terrestrial Sees as the current highest religious authority of the Ecumene. Third was Ilion Heavy Industries, a microgravity mining operation, which gained its status once the strange spiritual potential unique to the asteroid-adapted biology of its people

2
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TVCN2
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LAEVBU
ZMMODO
B202
EVAIDU
MILVICS2
23E
202LEND1
1120W
0012
VF100V
WCEW
DGT0VE
E1
T0B0VE
M101
IMCIDID0
LEMB0V
E102W0D
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10V
COM2EC1E
WWE1'
211
DGT0V
1B20W
T0BEM

became apparent. But most recent, recognized only in the past sixty years, is Triactis. Headquartered in the satellites of Zeus and dedicated to often cavalier genetic experimentation, its influence has transformed the outer system into a dizzyingly diverse and unpredictable place. With any exploration outside the limits of the system strictly and indefinitely forbidden, the region stands as the modern era's persistent frontier, where anything is possible. Our story is set among these fringes, in the wide and changing homeland of our crew



Synopsis

an emissary vessel from the See of Delphi, learned lawyers and messengers of the Sun, descend to the garden habitat of Savannah to uncover the nature of a mysterious project that might change the very key of the song of humanity.



2
LUCIP121
LET
TUCN2
VCCN1201
WRECEM02
G1UEBV
COMMOD
B1202
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N1LVIC2
23E
202LEND1
1120W
0012
VF100V
W00W
D0G0E
E1
T0B0E
M1M1
IMCIDIDN
LEMB0V
E102W0D
2ED DO
WE EG11'
VD1B12C1
10W
COM2EC1E
WWE1'
211
D0G0V
1120W
G0BEM



cw: religion, animal cruelty, ghosts(?)

Night fell down and it was done

When the river echoed shut

And the mountains' daylight ceased

And the willows whispered east

All the rest of mine remained

Beyond the sky and memory

When I first betrayed my song

And I laid – as always – wrong

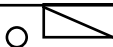
Then my goddess smiled sweet

Cry, o raven, cry for me

NEI
TUCN2
VCCNM20M
W0ECEN02
010EBB0
COMMOD0
B1202
EB001D0
0T1BICE2
22E
202LEWD1
1B20M
0012
0T1000
W0EN0
D0FOVE
EL
T0BOVE
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E102W0D
2ED D0
W0 E011'
V01B12C1
10B
COM20E
W0E
211
D0E0
1B
T0M

Don't
be
like
me
I
don't
know

RECORD I



- The Death of Aphrodite, M. Cortland

~~~~~

Record I

wherein our crew makes dock and gains its bearings, by  
bright auspices and dark hours

~~~~~

I had barely slept in the last fifty hours. Our three-month journey into the fringes of the wheel was at its end, and Saniasa eight hundred million miles behind us. The crew was in a flurry of supply checks, calibrations, and doubly frequent meetings. It was our first assignment in the field, and nerves ran high but steady.

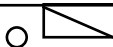
For better or worse, the crew had been collated entirely from recent graduates, and as such I was familiar with each of them from the haruspex academy. I knew the faces of our scribe and liaison, Didion and Henarl respectively, though we had never taken classes together due to their being male. Kaitei too had been a year ahead of us all, and better traveled by way of his engineer's curriculum. The long journey had eased us into a polite friendship after



the initial awkwardness of cohabitation, but Anahit and I had for years been close. We had made a point of sharing studies for several years, even as her coursework shifted towards the radically divergent speaker curriculum, and I was glad to have at least one person to lean on during this voyage. Prefect Bettany I could not say the same for. I had never been fond of her company, and her being chosen to lead this audit is why I had slept so poorly on this last, crucial leg.

Her continued nonchalance puzzled me. Was she ignoring all the signs that marked it as profoundly strange, or was she simply oblivious to them? She was tight-lipped and preening enough that it easily could have been either, and none of my pleas for reason had registered. We were an inexperienced team far out of our depth, and though I was confident in our training and in our judgement, I wondered if the archdiocese had been rash in choosing us.

The library was our customary gathering space for all our logistical discussions and team meetings. It was primarily a law library, for ours was a law ship, its shelves dedicated to case and practice of both the Ecumene chancery and the courts of our own Ilion. I had spent many hours in study and contemplation here watching the stars. We had



even begun taking our dinners here as the ship became more and more familiar to us, in the same plush perches on each of the walls that we now rested in, and it was a shame that my last hours with it would be spent in the tedium of our last crew meetings before the audit began. Before us, displayed on the beautiful arched glass windows facing the void, Bettany and Savannah's ruling HR director were engaged in the last formalities of welcome.

The contracts had all been finalized and signed months ago, and meaningful discussion would be saved for a habitat-side debrief in several hours, but what else was there to do now? He was a jolly man of monstrous stature called Anyndelhataman, face boldly striped, with the golden foliage of the habitat shining through the office windows behind him. He laughed and chatted with our obliging prefect as if his office were a tourism agency.

Meanwhile, Savannah approached.

Its hull was built to resemble wide-spaced wicker overgrown with vinewood and yellow ivy, with spaces in the lattice through which the white ceramic that made up its core structure was visible. It recalled an arm cut to the bone again and again. It also lacked windows, and thus lacked a way for sun to touch its interior terrain - this



was exceedingly strange, as the hulls of habitats typically dedicated half their area to windows. How could anything living grow properly without sun? It turned, a monolith in the void, the size of a continent where most habitats were but cities.

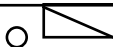
I silently said a Guide Christopher to myself, as my stomach lurched at the sight.



Twenty minutes in depressurization, thirty minutes in decontamination, the stagnant air and blinding lamps roasting and rotting us the entire hour. I was withered and exhausted in the ultraviolet light when Anahit sidled up to me. “I say again, Emelry it will be a cult,” she hissed. “The ley is so sour here. Can you feel it, can you?”

I fidgeted in my uniform. “Patience, Anahit. More than likely, it is only the air.” I drew a sheaf of pills from my medicine box. “Here is another. Kaitei’s arranged for a larger supply of antiolfactants, as even he was affected.” Kaitei glanced at me.

“And these will truly help with the smell?” Anahit asked, already snatching one up. “It is like soil and septic and



mildew, I just don't understand how the changelings can live with it..."

"We've been over this," Kaitei said from where he clung to the opposite wall, "raw air is raw air. And not only do our present clients 'live with it', it is the standard across the world. It is the scent of life! Those'll help, but you're going to need to build a resistance eventually."

Anahit grimaced and covered her eyes. Bettany laughed, her hair rippling in the air - she kept it at a full four inches, longer than any of us, and years ago this was the first of many ill impressions I had of her. I saw her dip into her own pills a moment later.

We had known boarding would be an ordeal. Months of travel, comfortable though they may be made, take a toll on their passengers. To add a period of adaptation to a place not built for your kind made it yet the more oppressive. The landscape of Savannah was spun up to the same gravity level as most habitats were, Areal standard, and oh, I had blanched upon hearing as much!

Our kind live in few places outside of Ilion. Neotenes, unique among all the species of humanity, were designed to live and work and grow in the lack of gravity - hence our



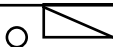


elegant and diminutive forms, spared many of the decays of age. Areal would crush and immobilize us, no matter what cumbersome mechanical assistance we may employ. But, to my relief, the landscape was not where we would be working, and the residential caps of the habitat were kept at a proper unweight. This meant one thing - Savannah was preparing for tourists, sometime down the line. Now, Triactis settlements doubling as resorts and museums was nothing new, but rarely were they advertised so early as this.

At last the locks chimed gently. Bettany called, "Come, that's the last of it. We will enter in formation. Speaker, if you would?"

Anahit moved to the front of the line, and I found my place just below her, with Bettany beside me. Together we put up our hoods, and I heard the men do the same behind us. I swallowed and felt my ears pop, and thankfully the rank, organic scent had died down. Anahit cleared her throat and clapped twice, recited a short praise of passage, and with that our work was begun.

We disembarked from our Umihotaru directly into the under-construction loading bays. It pained me to leave it alongside the tankers, bulwarks and scaffolding of the



port looming around it - the law ship was our last physical connection to home. It, proud and pale gold among all the strange color of the edifice, watched me as well as I turned into a place that was not mine.



It had been a long way here, for Savannah lay in one of the most remote regions of the world. These were the Hildas, the sparse cluster of asteroids on the furthest rim of the wheel, opposite in orbit from the greatest of the world's celestial bodies. The gravity of Zeus was, in fact, what created them. Eons ago it had shepherded them into their place, and even now held them there as distant as was possible from the dense hub of frontier settlement now clustered around it and its major satellites. Even the supply ships of Ilion, which brought bounty and security to life along the wheel, did not reach the Hildas - for they remained the single span of the wheel not in Ilian territory. Few, even among we of the outer system, would ever have the occasion to visit - much less build great triumphs here.

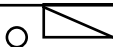
But build they had, and from far they came. Savannah's staff drew from across the full span of the world, from the inner system to the fringes - not only the expected Triactans, those of Savannah's native company, but so too from



Lune, Ares, even Heath itself. My assumption had been that a project of this scale, so determined to preserve its secrets of trade, would have kept its recruiting to a closer circle.

And this was not only its crew: even its executive team was a melting pot. This is where I began my dossier, two months prior. I had chosen six among the leadership to begin my interrogations with: four foreigners, and two Triactans, and had scrounged all the information I could find of them into the small book of records I worked out of as a lieutenant. Of course, my role was a broader documentation of persons of interests than a sole six strangers, but I was trained to start where my intuition demanded. Therefore I would ask of these illustrious foreigners how they had found their way to the periphery of creation, and of the natives, more. What then follows is a list of those among the staff whose testimony I would build my audit upon:

Sever Malice set Pearl Wall. Perhaps the strangest name on the staff registry. Born as a member of the world's oldest extant nobility, the Board of Hightower, he was now exiled from it. Why? Any rationale had been aggressively suppressed by the Board in the years after, and I had little



confidence I could coax the story out of him. Even rumors were hard to come by. The best I could tell, an extreme disagreement with his family had spiraled into a conflict with the Board as a whole, and he was summarily banished from lunic space and Hightower-built habitats. This meant banishment from nearly every habitat, and thus the vast majority of the world. This must have pained him terribly, for Sever had once been an architect, responsible at the highest level for the design of habitats of his own - the founding enterprise and most honored art of his homeland. Now he was here, the sole lord of his radical masterpiece, shunned by all among his people but for his own retinue.

Chief among this retinue was one Beckon Bell sel Nine Leaves, a former intern protege from a long-allied vassal house, and current chief engineer of Savannah's life support infrastructure. A loyal squire boy who fled Lune alongside his master, and had grown to seek their fortunes together - a storybook romance, by their culture's standards. He was said to be similarly devoted to his faith, though what Hightowerers worshipped aside from their own achievements was beyond me. There was no particular intrigue to his name, and until Savannah he had led a life typical of any among the citizen-shareholdery. But



still he was a key figure. There was no better source on the systems and secrets of Savannah's structure, and it was my hope that he would be more forthcoming than his husband.

One more inner-systemer had caught my eye: Razina Savelyevna, chief ecosystemic analyst. She was responsible for the broader strokes of Savannah's biosphere and presumably still involved in its maintenance. Her background in comparative ecology was extensive and impressive, not least of all because she was born on Heath, and conducted a great bulk of her work there. There was no better case study of an ancient and dynamic biosphere than the birthworld itself, and the qualities of a natural planet were precisely what Savannah was built to mimic. She, in her phases of humanitarian work, had also published extensively on the oft-ignored unaffiliated habitats' lack of access to transportation and stable ecology both. This suggested, in combination with her work at Savannah, a deep-lying interest in the fragile and the strange. Of all featured in my dossier - indeed of all the staff - she was the most foreign to me, and I itched to speak to her.

Most alarming of my candidates was by far Kuryo Redname. An apostate born and bred, she was until a decade



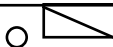
or so ago a member of some hit-and-run flock of junk vessels that had managed to attract the attention of a previous generation of law ships. The scheme they lived by was a mixture of theft and force under the guise of simple black market trade, commandeering isolated habitats many of them Ilian, despite her being a neotene herself and demanding sunbeam access and supplies in exchange for whatever illicit cargo they happened to have on hand. It was unforgivable, unheard of, and could never last long. She broke with them and joined civilization only a few years before the group was brought to justice, and had somehow found work as chief of sales and inventory for all of Savannah. This was a rise so meteorically above her station that it could only have involved foul play. I hesitated to even contact her, her inclusion amongst the staff disturbed me so, but for that very reason a confrontation with her was necessary.

Those were the foreigners, but two more had caught my eye. Both were changelings, native to Triactis, and perhaps most fascinating and most deeply entangled with what Savannah was. First was Tacimarsa - a mysterious woman from Zeussian space. She lacked a distinct public presence, but when I took the time to build a resume for her, I was shocked. Tenures aboard several mainline Triactis ex-



perimental habitats — one of the few survivors of the Aprilata project, and one of the Weylbloom project's founders? What two names could chill one's heart so surely as those? She habitually took titles in the vein of "head consultant" or "supplementary specialist" (the latter of which happened to be her current one here), placing herself in positions just below official responsibility yet just above being beholden to a chain of command. I had my eye on her for the last month of the transit in as I completed my research, and her presence was the impetus for my calling a lockdown as soon as we docked. She had been scheduled to fly out mere days after we arrived, and I could not allow that — even and especially if she was the harbinger of disaster for Triactis's more cutting-edge endeavors that she appeared to be.

The second changeling was Coteshinoeleon, and it was with him that I was most eager for an audience with. Savannah's project lead, its core mastermind, and off the grid to an extent I was not aware was possible in the modern era. I had used every resource of archival and inquiry available to me, and had found almost nothing beyond his age (84), birthplace (Milagros Moris habitat, Heran orbit also Tacimarsa's hometown), schooling (some unassuming martial academy near Saniasa), and work history: Savan-



nah staff, and Savannah staff alone. A man who had apparently done nothing but plan this work for decades without break, while uttering not a word of it in any public forum. I had found but a single quote of his, from his brief days as an understudy. It was an internal Triactis newsletter covering the earliest conceptual stages of Savannah:

“Triactis overflows and bleeds with life. What we did in a hundred years for the advancement and development of life is what typically takes a hundred million. A thousand colors in a thousand flowers, field a thousand miles square. That’s always been a metaphor, you know, and I don’t wanna keep it one. I don’t want to play in a garden my whole life. I want a golden crown [...] for our best gems. I want the canvas of a golden land. I think my colleagues all want something like that. What could be better than the savanna to hold all of it?”

So few words to say so little, a dreaming twenty-year-old who would rapidly gain the confidence of his company’s highest echelons. Was it nepotism, bribery, luck? After that single quote, it was all project briefs and technical documents of increasing complexity and import, which listed him as only a fourth or fifth contributing author at best. He eventually fell off their lists completely. If I had not

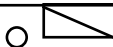


already met Anyndelhataman, I would have assumed that this was the figurehead, but this blank in the record was too conspicuous. It could not be explained by a genuine lack of consequence. I needed to see him.

Coteshinoeleon, I wagered, was the one who could answer a question that had quietly burned in my mind since we had begun work. The only habitat of a comparable scale to Savannah was New Medina, located at the very heart of the world, in the capital dysonspace of the See. Two centuries it took for its construction to complete - how then had Savannah, in a quarter of that time, been built half again as grand? One could explain it easily by pointing to better manufacturing infrastructure, the presence of a proven template to work off of, or sheer resolve. But none of these served as a real answer.

I leafed through my papers one last time. The exiled royal with only his dreams and his lover left to his name. The humble Heathling so far from her home, and the outlaw who I suspected had never truly left hers. And lastly, the two changelings who had so carefully cultivated mystery about them, shielded by the bastion they built. I pushed into Anyndelhataman's office.

"Ah! Lieutenant, finally get to see you in person! Come



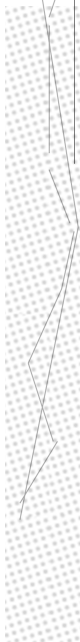
take a seat. Here to drop off the paperwork Bettany mentioned?" He attempted an Ilian genuflection. "Hey, pretty good, right?"

I smiled despite myself, and returned it. "I thank you for your welcome, Director, and it is well met."

"Found your way here fine, looks like. Didn't you just board?"

He towered before me from his desk. No two changelings were alike, and it was only after several months of working with Triactis that I was now becoming accustomed to their appearances. His entire body was chromatically patterned after a tiger, claws sprouted from his hands and bone spurs out from his arms, his neck had been elongated by half a foot. I did not wish to stare, but it was polite among his people to stare, and I had spent much of our conversations during the journey simply trying to pick out each modification and quirk he had gathered in himself. We must have appeared strange to him as well, as small and as similar as neotenes are.

"Yes, minutes ago. Your secretary showed me the way. I realize I've called upon you so shortly before the debrief, but I shall begin interrogations in thirty hours or so. I require





meetings with this list of people, in this order.”

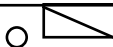
I plucked a page from my dossier and handed it to him. “Absolutely. I’ll take that.” He grinned to himself as he read through the names and I found my perch. I noticed his face darken upon reaching the last page, but a moment later and his eager manner had returned. “Okay, okay, this makes sense... hey, you sure you only wanna start with six? It seems low for a first round.”

“That’s quite alright. I have chosen carefully. This is anticipated to be a longer audit than usual, and we’ve elected to take additional care with the initial interrogations.”

He shrugged. “I’ll get time on everyone’s calendars then, whenever’s best for you. When’s second round, then?”

“Undecided. I apologize.”

“Totally fine.” He leaned forward and lowered his voice conspiratorially. “But listen, when you do start seconds, come find me. Alright? I really want to put you in touch with some of our guys in publicity and marketing, seriously. This is the first big attention we’ve gotten, and they’ll be the best foot forward you could ask for. Anything you need from me, even if statute doesn’t require it.”



"I will keep that in mind. Thank you, their perspective does indeed sound enlightening."

"It is! We actually put together some materials for you and your team, just to give you an idea. Lieutenant, once again, I can't stress enough how happy I am you'll have the chance to stay so long. I actually have some ready, for your team, plus a few other materials..." he handed me from his desk his own stack of papers - a few maps, and around twenty brochures and pamphlets. "I've marked my office on those floorplans, for whenever you need to drop off or pick up stuff. I've also marked a little lounge in the middle rings, most gorgeous view this side."

"Well!" I marvelled, and leafed through them. Colorful but cheaply printed, all marked with warnings about their being for pre-release purposes only and not final copy, covered in art and bold lettering... Anyndelhataman was certainly unabashed in showing his marketing roots. I had expected this from what I'd read of his files, but now the doubt set in that I would be able to rely on him as much as he insisted I would. This was acceptable. "Enlightening, but ah, look at the time! I will be on my way with one last question, Director, if you are still open to favors."

"Yes! Shoot!"





“This is for personal purposes rather than strict haruspical concern... but I do have an interest in meeting with any more senior theologic personnel of Savannah, and had hopes of learning from their perspective. But, on the staff registry, I was able to find very few. Is there no representative of the Triactan archdiocese on board?”

He hesitated. With a look of concern, he said, “Isn’t that why Cote was on the list?”



Anahit found me quickly.

“Emelry. Emelry! Oh, thank heaven you’re done.” There was no time until the debrief. She was here to collect me, out of breath and clutching at my sleeve. “I’ve begun my readings, you must see this!”

“Hello, Anahit. Here, relieve me of a few of these. Even the few is enough for a textbook.” I flipped upside-down to face her, and made to unload half the pamphlets into her care. She brushed them aside and they spiraled into the air around us. “My!”

“Emelry! Please hear me. Something is wrong. Deeply



so.” She sighed, and pulled me down the corridor. “I must show you myself before this pageant of a meeting.”

“What? What is this, what did you find?” I asked, not daring to grasp the wall to slow her. We continued floating down the corridor a bit faster than was comfortable. “Are you still convinced of your cult?”

In typical circumstances, she would have snapped at me for that. She only looked ahead. “Yes. I don’t know. Perhaps worse.”

We hastened back to the docks. No sooner had we returned to the library than Anahit threw herself towards a perch and grabbed it with her feet. She had rearranged everything - pushed the shelves back into the wall and strapped everything down, making room for her equipment floating by the walls. A cylinder of water was suspended in the center of the room, and Anahit’s eyes were fixed on the steady pattern of roiling bubbles in its center. I watched too, though less intently, as the whirl turned in on itself and spread faint ripples on the shape’s surface. This was her ongoing water scry of Savannah, mimicking its shape and providing a rough reading of the web of life force within it.





“Tell me, Anahit. What have you seen?”

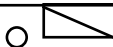
She spoke hesitantly. “When Lady Olkha did you take classes with her?”

I perched across from her, still watching the water. “Yes, but only the one.”

“Mm. We work quite closely in my vision courses. When I was learning the water scry, she was telling me of an audit she ran many decades ago.”

“Ah... yes. She did make her name at Weylbloom?” I asked. Anahit nodded a yes. “A shame... I did not know she spoke of it.”

“Yes. Only to her speaker students. It was terrible even to hear of, all those people, the state of their afflicted souls... I won’t dwell on the morbidity, you’ve read the case, and know how long they were made to live. What matters was the scry. A proper scry reacts to each soul in its range of vision, resonates with their individual light, and resubstantiates that soul-light into heat—hence, the boil when calibrated to scale. But sometimes... aha. Do you know how she demonstrated this to me?”



“How?”

She struck her palm with her fist. “She captured a scry of a mouse’s body at the moment she drove a nail into its spine. It was horrible, the heat came out... wrong. A jagged and tilting heat, not the hale fire of a heart. Neither dying nor living. That, she said, was what it had looked like in her initial reads of Weylbloom. The first signs of those poor thousand ghosts.”

I was no speaker. Anahit’s role was by far the most specialized of the six, more altar maiden than detective. I could not hope in another decade to grasp the delicacy of her work, and the attunement to all adoration it required: to my unpracticed eyes this seemed a scry as any other. But I knew her, and knew she saw true.

“And that is what you are seeing? I have memorized the staff registry. There are five thousand employees garri-soned here, are they all... strange?”

“No, aha.” She wiped her tearless face. “No, they are accounted for. Five thousand, living in the caps, whole and at their assignments. The strangeness comes from the interior, and... oh, Emelry! The more I stare at this, the less I can hope to doubt it. There are two million of them. Two





million warped half-souls, across all the landscape. I don't know what to do."

~~~~~

Bettany droned on. I perched at her side on the presentation dias as she gestured and spun in her speech. The crowd circling us was a mercifully small one, and I nursed my veal compote.

"I realize our presence here is an imposition, especially when the project is preparing to go public. It is a delicate phase. I'm sure you've heard, but this is our team's first major assignment, and the first full audit we will be conducting. I mean it, I was more scared of this than some of you!"

She won some laughs at that. I wasn't actually convinced that Bettany could feel fear; her mind was simply not built to register it.

Gathered in the ornate yet rustic conference room was most of the operational management of Savannah, its leaders and departments heads. Many from my dossier I saw in the flesh for the first time here. Sever and Beckon sat furthest from the display screen, whispering together



behind their fans, and I couldn't help but note that much of their clothing was dyed ultraviolet. This was strange, as I knew they were unable to see the color themselves. Tacimarsa too was curiously dressed, entirely in black, when Triactians were notorious for their garishly colorful sense of fashion. She perched at the side of Coteshinoeleon - regal, upright, and unbothered by the oxygen tubes and several IVs bundled to him. He was an unwavering old man, and his sky-blue skin glimmered in the light. Besides these were ten or so others, drawn from the various offices across the habitat, and all were anxious but smiling. Our crew were the only neotenes in the room.

The dinner was a good one. Our hosts (primarily Anyndelhataman, who was blending in with the waiters above the table had made a show of explaining each course to us in detail, how each ingredient was foraged from the wilds of Savannah - deer from the terminal plains, goat from the central highlands, lemons from the river ridges, lotus root from the inland sea. The walls were paneled with acacia wood and grass planters that mimicked both the landscape of Savannah and the habitat's hull. Beautiful showmanship, as I was quickly coming to expect from our hosts.

Bettany continued. "I meditated a long time on the journey



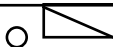


here as to what this responsibility meant for us. I pored over my case law, all the high-profile disasters, preparing for the worst. I felt that our greenness was a liability, that I in my inexperience would miss some quirk of... the sometimes labyrinthine proceduralism of Ilion, and doom us all in the midst of a project so crucial as this. But that was because I did not understand my role.

“We are not here to dig up dirt. The word ‘haruspex’ may carry some less than kind associations with it, but the haruspex corps is fundamentally an organization of discovery—words like interrogation and investigation carry the wrong message. We want to learn. Of what this place is, who you are, and all the hopes and works that have come into confluence within this hull. I know it is something you are proud of.

“My liaison and lieutenant will, over the coming weeks, be holding interviews and making explorations of Savannah. Please treat them as archivists, and entrust them with what you would have known of Savannah in the sight of Adonai. Explain to them this masterpiece. My hope is that it will be a high point of the long relationship between our two companies—and, indeed, our species.”

Applause. Archivists, she said! I would thank her for that



later her feigned charm could grate upon me, but it was certainly disarming. She shifted into a happier tone and continued, laying out the basics of our scheduling and procedures. First week preliminary observations, second week the full of the audit, and third our hearing held. From there it would conclude, or else move to another audit and hearing cycle until all obligations were satisfied. She took questions, ramped up the banter, and halfway through my watered wine I felt myself cease listening.

I looked to the rest of the team. Henarl was beaming, nodding along with the crowd. Kaitei fiddled on his tablet as usual, Didion earnestly took minutes, and Anahit was bright and unperturbed. She was sociable, more so than usual, and never lost her composure.

“Thank you, colleagues, for your sympathy.” Bettany had finished. “Speaker Anahit. Would you provide us with a closing prayer?”

Anahit straightened, and nodded with a smile. “Of course, prefect. Today, it would be my honor to lead you in a Sofia Capac, Be My Mercy, to celebrate the advent of our joint explorations. If you would follow along with your tablets...”



She led, and they all fumbled to make time.

“Dear fire ne’er created

O dew in lonely dawn...”

The group kept up as best they could for five or so verses, few used to singing even basic hymnals. I watched them most intently here. Anyndelhataman squinted at his lyrics and mumbled the whole way through, the lunics sang with proud clarion voices... but Tacimarsa, at the back of the crowd, sang so clear and sweet and simple that something in me wanted to cry. She did not look at the words once.



“Bettany. We must talk,” I said, gliding alongside her as the debrief ended, and the last of the staff filtered out.

“Tomorrow, lieutenant,” she waved airily. “I’ve a second dinner with the command staff.”

“What?”

“Anyndel and Cote, you know. We’ve plans to stop at a lounge down by... oh.” She had caught the confusion on my face. She smirked, in that pursed-lip way she had.



"Tomorrow. Really, I warned you about this, you made no effort to build a day cycle. Half your job is cultural acclimation. Statute, in fact, calls for you to lead the crew in "

"Bettany..." I glanced around us, confirming that the room was empty but for our crew. "I must insist. Anahit's preliminaries have yielded truly grave signs, I think it is better that you hear of this soon... Something is deeply wrong."

"Alright, alright, we shall hear it," she sighed and shook her head. "But please, keep to tomorrow. Good material for our morning meetings, no? Didion should have put them on your calendar, do accept."

"Prefect!" I started forward, voice raised. "Look here, I - !"

She faced me, calmer and unsmiling. "Lieutenant. I do not mean to bicker with you. I ask for no word now, that you sleep and consider, and phrase well what you wish to say. I was quite proud of that speech, and would like to run on its fumes another night... Let's not have this audit operate on a gossip of first impressions and maybe-leads. I need no suggestions. I need facts, evidence, and a course of direction. Do you understand?"

Oh, I seethed in my heart then. But she was right. "I do. I



do, thank you. I will reconfirm the readings, and begin my interviews, and we will speak in the... morning. But please hear me then. I... I do not know that we are safe here.”

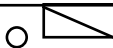
“Good. Excellent. Thank you, Emelry, and I do respect your fears.” She lowered her voice, and leaned closer. “Please tread carefully out there. Use tonight to get your bearings. I and Henarl will be occupied for some days, and we could all use some orienting. The ley is sour here.”

“I understand. And good luck.”

“Of course.” She smiled, and threw her voice back to its usual city-girl tamber. “Then, see you soon!”



The day was ending. Soon the crew would be retiring to sleep en masse, which meant that everything would close down. The lights, the few shops in operation, the offices. But I was wide and well awake still. All I could do in the absence of my team or interview targets was to explore or meditate, and I resolved to do both at once. I picked out the lounge Anyndelhataman had recommended to me, on the opposite side of the cap. I took the rail.



I passed miles of offices, gardens, amenities, hotels, restaurants. It was well-lit, lushly planted, clean - but empty. It would be years until these halls would be populated by anyone save the current skeleton crew and ourselves. The caps of Savannah were meant to be cities in their own right. They were built as such. The bulk of their physical area was taken up by great industrial edifice - manufactories, mass transport, and the dockyards - but their inner residential areas were small, well-organized townships.

The foyer I disembarked into was similar to that where I began - only that here was red marble and palm, and there yellow marble and cypress. All I heard was the echo of the train as it departed, and distant muffled clangs I could not identify. From the plaza I took a corridor inward.

I thought myself well-prepared to see the interior. The live drone feeds we had been shown during our previous briefings, the picturesque plains and mountains of the brochures - I had thought I had a sense for it. I had seen many images of Heath from orbit, and assumed Savannah would look similar, only with different geometry. But as I entered the lounge, and saw for the first time the breadth of Savannah laid out before me, my heart stopped.

My eyes could not process what they were seeing. The ap-

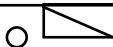


proach had not done it justice, nothing could. As I looked further down the cylinder, the vista gradually faded to blue, before dissolving further into a shimmering distorted pool of light and color and mirage haze as the hollow sky stretched into its full four-thousand-mile depth. It seemed to disappear into itself - for a moment it was as if I was staring into Anahit's scry again. Was I going blind?

Every cell in my body screamed for me to vomit. I was falling, endless empty and choked, all my hands grasping for structure that I knew would vanish at the touch. I almost lost consciousness, but I felt someone take me and turn my head away from the windows, and the world slowly stopped spinning.

"I apologize," I burst out, still sightless. The smell of copper and blood was stronger than it ever had been, even during depressurization. "Oh, I am terribly sorry. I was not made to see things as this, you understand. Please let me collect myself. I beg you, this is unbecoming."

A woman's voice answered me, with an accent I could not trace. "It's alright, you're just fine. Perfectly normal over-view reaction, everyone gets them... though I do guess knytts would be worse affected. Here, just sit and watch the wall, and you'll be fine once your stomach settles."



"Thank you, kind stranger. Again I beg you, look away."

I fidgeted with my loosened hood, ensuring my hair was covered, too preoccupied to register the rather uncultured word she had used.

"Alright, alright. I'm literally facing the opposite direction, okay? Your dignity's intact, I promise."

Small comfort. But I followed her instructions, and took careful measured breaths, until by and by I could open my eyes again.

"Alright?" she asked. "Still with us?"

"Yes. Yes, I am. I am decent again. I would like to thank you."

"Well, of course and you're welcome. Aha." She looked me over. "So, you're our inquisitor. What're you even doing here?"

I caught my breath and straightened, meeting her eyes. I found that I recognized her, as she had me.

She was built strong, in the formidable but graceless way all Heathlings are. Betraying her heritage to a lesser extent was the tether at her waist fastened to the railings at



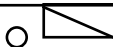
the window - clearly unused to unweight, and relying on ropes like a child. She of course dwarfed me in length, but would be considered short by most species' standards. Her uniform was disheveled and her hair barely tamed, but she carried herself with surety and conviction - I gathered that she was a solitary woman.

I caught my breath and straightened again. "Well. I am glad you've recognized us, correct. Emelry Sainshand, crew's lieutenant, and you are Razina Savelyevna. I have come to view the interior from a better angle than my quarters. And, pardon my forwardness, but you've earned a place in my dossier."

"Oh. Well, 'on the list'... I hope that's a good thing." She pointed at me with her hand for several moments before withdrawing it. Strange, she didn't seem like the fidgeting type.

"Of course. I had not anticipated making your acquaintance for several days. Thank you for your assistance, it is... quite a sight."

"It is, isn't it?" She smiled, and together we turned to watch the windows once more. It still made my head spin, to look upon it, but it was now an easier task. I kept my



gaze from the far distance, and followed instead the run of rivers and forests closer to where we stood - though still tens of miles away.

“Ah, what do you know. Good timing. Look, lieutenant, there’s a barge coming in.”

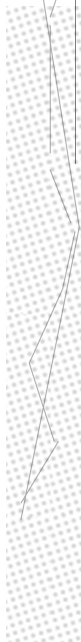
I followed where she pointed. From far away, running along rails connected to the habitat’s spine, which ran from cap to cap along the interior, was a vast cylinder. How large? I could barely tell. “Just how large...?”

“Massive. Refitted oneill hulls, actually. We’ve been using them for a long time, to ferry bulk materials across the landscape - all the water you see below you, most of the soil, were all dumped from one of these and left to settle.”

I saw she was right - although painted over a light blue, the barges indeed bore the characteristic ceramic and glass structure. “Are they still used?”

“For that? No, all the scaping-out was finished ages ago, and a natural water cycle’s already taken over. Just normal clouds now.”

A small wave of nausea impacted me but left quickly. I





squinted. “And why the lack of natural sunlight?”

“Oh, that’s...” She paused, with a subtle frown. “Sorry, am I on record right now or something? I wasn’t really expecting questions already,” she asked.

“No, not at all. Our meeting is as of yet unscheduled, and would not be so soon. You will know.”

“Huh.”

We watched as the barge continued pulling in.

“Though I had hoped for conversation,” I said.

She caught my smile, and sighed. “Actual sunlight wouldn’t be practical. Breaking up the landscape to that extent would give us so much less to work with, and split up populations unnaturally. Glass over this large of a superstructure would be under too much stress, anyway. We use lighting built into the spine to mimic the qualities of sunlight as accurately as we can, and there’s a subtle rainy and dry season cycle. It was a practical choice, not an artistic one.”

“A season cycle... as those of Heath? How is that achieved?”



“Well it’s not just the planet. Any oneill can have seasons, but again, that’s all window work we can’t do. It’s scheduled to dim and brighten over the course of months, with a bit of aid from the ventilation systems.”

“Ah, I see. We have been told Savannah was a stable biosphere, I did not know it still required such maintenance.”

“Listen, miss Sainshand...” I saw something like anger flash across her face and fade just as quickly. She shifted her posture. “Savannah is young. She is sparser and plainer than she will be. We cull deer herds, pump in more water yearly, it’s a process, but... how do I put this. Look, most of the work we do now is observational. We track water quality, soil acidity, changes in animal populations and foliage cover. It’s a lot of work, a lot of surveying. But... if we stopped doing that. If I quit my job, if the lights went out, if everything failed completely. Life here wouldn’t end. It would change, drastically, in ways we won’t let it change yet. But life here’s put down roots enough that some human failure can’t kill it anymore. That’s what we mean by stable, and it’s what I’m most proud of. What I’ve put twenty years into. Does that make sense?”

“Twenty years. I see.”



She braced herself against the railing, and pivoted her body to face me. Behind her, the barge disappeared as it continued its journey into the cap, swallowed by the little city.

“Since ‘38. I’m glad you came to take a look, and I’m glad it knocked you over. But you are questioning me, and if you don’t mind, let’s save it. Good night, lieutenant.” She unhooked her tether, and kicked off hard to float to the doors.

“One last thing?” I called after her. “You have my word it is only a question, not a questioning.”

She stopped at the threshold. “Alright.”

“A certain member of my crew has indicated they’d like to visit the landscape personally. Is that a possibility? I’ve no idea who to ask to find a way down.”

“The actual surface? Could you all even handle it?”

“She’s been exercising.”

She sighed again, patience wearing thin. “Well, if you’re that set on it... You can catch one of the trains down, but it’d be a day-long trip each way. I’m not sure that’d fit into



your schedules. Talk to the HR director, he can get you some drones to fly around with if you want to look around that badly. That okay?"

"Yes, it is. Thank you."

I let her leave. Perhaps I had been a touch too curious, or she a touch wary.

I braced against the railings, where she had before. I followed a river winding down from the hills at the foot of the caps, out past the tiny clusters of outposts and tilled fields into the wilderness. Beneath the distant cloud cover (which was natural, but nonetheless to me recalled the billows of fumes and debris one often saw rising from mining installations back home) it led through marshland and rocky veldt, until I could follow it no more for the trees. In which season was I seeing this land for the first time? I meditated on this, as I had come to do.

Anahit and Kaitei had remained aboard Umihotaru - Kaitei for the duties of his role, and Anahit because she refused to sleep in a place she was so suspicious of. I reminded her that even by her own standards the caps were not haunt-

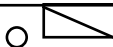


ed, but she vehemently ignored me. Bettany and Henar, meanwhile, had traipsed off laughing to staff quarters after the debrief. They had insisted on “spending the night” under light gravity to begin acclimating themselves, in a shockingly inappropriate display of deference to the people we were meant to be auditing. Of course Didion sheepishly bustled in after them. This left me alone in the block of quarters especially reserved for our crew, housed in the spine with windows overlooking the interior.

As I at last guided my bags to the door, I was glad indeed to have made such a fool of myself in the observation lounge. The sight from these windows still shook me, and I had to rest and look away from that impossibly distant and impossibly wide land. But now, the wave passed in moments rather than minutes. Soon I was able to look without flinching, and without that certain fear of falling

I unpacked my effects - my talismans above the entry, my sleeping quilt on the bed. The room was grey-blue and its walls soft-carpeted, calling to mind cheap public dorms on crowded liners. Natural portraits of Savannah’s interior played on the room’s screens, colorful and framed as if from Anyndelhataman’s brochures.

My little conversation, and the fainting episode before it,



had drained me. Unfortunately it seemed as if I was meant to sleep as the light faded; I could feel my body slowing down. As I strapped myself into bed, I watched the surface before me in the latter stages of its evening hours, the brilliant gold-green of its fields and forests giving way to deep purples, reds, blues before settling to an uncanny near-black. There was something hypnotizing about it, and though I must have stood there watching for ages, it all felt so fast. But at last I did feel sleep, by some instinct older even than my species, creep through that dark to take me.

Then a sound pierced the air.

It was an impact. A sharp, heavy thud directly before me. I started, knocking aside the blankets, illuminating the room - but this only made the outer black a deeper pitch. The noise continued, a horrible whistling broom-strike, over and over, on the glass itself. From the outside! All my hopes and tolerance of this place fled - surely this shoddily-built monstrosity was an illusion and always had been, surely it's rickety skeleton was not meant for life - I was falling, falling after all, and soon the spine would crack and the glass would shatter and I would be thrown out into the utter vast night air! All my childhood fears of the void come true, but crueller: I would breathe! The noise





continued, rasping and whirling, I felt tears begin to pool over my eyes --

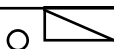
"Lieutenant. Lieutenant!" came a hoarse mockery of a voice. The vocal equivalent of a left-handed chalkboard scrawl, a croaking, robotic approximation of syllables from across the glass. "An audience."

"Who passes here! Who speaks!" I whirled to the door to find the intruder, but already my heart knew where it lay. Once again the wheeze from outside spoke.

"Calling, of calling who is king. A herald calls!" A pounding came, and the light upon the glass danced at every fist beat. "Find we, anon grave tree. Word and rain, say we scrivener. Calling and the king."

And then it was gone, and quiet again, and the world took shape and light again. I caught my breath in silence, and waited hours before moving again. Surely I had seen a shade, a dead man, and surely it had called for me, and surely this place was thrice as cursed as any of us had dreamt.

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NEW ANIMALS -Grotesque aesthetics have become a focus on wired textual art scenes. Heavy visceral imagery is something familiar across the internet and its attention economy which has spread to art forms from text to even games such as Cruelty Squad. In the abstraction of the wired, how do artists begin to affect others. The tundra of NEW ANIMALS seems just like that with its wandering mercenaries, relentless industries on a dying world and the gore of violence and mutation. This landscape is familiar in that it mirrors the effects of climate crises but NEW ANIMALS gives this world a polyphony that dances across the lichen.

Like the artist's previous work, COSMUSEUM, NEW ANIMALS retains the same virtuosity and scale but with greater focus. The first prologue brings so much world with details of the various companies and climate disasters that brought Hudson and Amelia together before their encounter with the Bears. This world is not just the companies or the mercenaries on the decessitated earth but the astral that looms over the conflict before introducing the creatures that brought the violence pause. There is much character exploration alongside the world that still

## NOTES



keeps pace despite not delving into the character's interiors. That depth goes to the second prologue: Graduation whose change from The Bears is reminiscent of denpa-kei aesthetics: endless everyday, sudden violence. Essein's departure from high school is familiar but the specificity and raw experience conjures this so much it almost puts the initial prologue into memory. It will not be long until the prologues intersect.

**SWORDS UNDER THE PHOSPHOR SKY-** Apart from works such as Subahibi or Amygdalatropolis or No Tiger, it's rare for text to capture the present moment. The 2010s-20s were a year of great stratification in culture and politics and much of the response has seen little action, contributing mostly to cultural strife through articles and youtube commentary. Swords Under the Phosphor Sky not only captures the essence of the present but renders it in such a lush way that one can experience the world of the 2010s: a world radiant in media and hyperviolence.

Yelena's landscape is an interior familiar to many who have grown up with the internet. the bodily description inhabits the spaces she's in whether it's from her mother's native wisdoms to girlhood at the summer camp with Christine, her experience is specific with disaffect and unfulfilled



desire. 2010s is known for the solidification of the affect economy, one that is based in cultural imagery in order to maximize engagement and attention. Yelena's world is rendered to show that landscape and the alienated bodies from the mediated, the other bodies unlike hers. Unlike American Psycho, this world is already familiar with the gruesome violence and its abstract yet stylized geometries. No matter what happens, one cannot look away.

MERCENARY PLANET - Despite much of the turmoil within the 2010s, there is little said about the great intimacy that was indeed present. Mercenary Planet is a work that embraces everything both from the music that Mai creates to Leona's anomie upon homecoming, the starlight that guides all of them. Each are out to not only find the possibility but the necessity to find a new world.

Despite an encounter with a cosmic being, this work is very grounded with its depiction of precariousness. Leona's interior is well realized as they encounter many cultural phenomenon tied with their own dysphoria affecting their daily life back in the city amidst the perilous conditions them and their friends face. If there is one thing about the 2010s that this work understands, it's the precarious generation whose daily life is rocked by instability



be it physical, sexual or otherwise. even leona's brother who is not exposed to the same life deals drugs and makes their own lab. all of this is a source of tension between them and their parents, the generation before theirs with stable income yet unable to maintain their semblance of family. this kind of disintegration is ultimately what pushes Leona in their studies, in their hopes to connect better with Mai and ultimately, to understand others unlike themselves. That not only they have the capacity to know the same feelings but also begin to communicate to those beings.

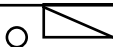
SCARRED ZERUEL - Cyberpunk is commonly defined in exterior styles that proclaim the future in the asymmetrical but rarely has it become an interior landscape. While none of the present time may look like cyberpunk, much of the psychological phenomenon is very much a reality. Cyberpunk is an ethereal presence and Scarred Zeruel manages to capture a psycho-floral dimension inhabiting virtual space lush with flora and static that carries pheromones and data alike.

SCARRED ZERUEL's minimal yet concise text uses both its medium and the visual. its short sections make use of the white space, as if each sentence floats within it much



like the impressions morgan experiences. these impressions are also strong in their description but enough so as not to be too clear. much like morgan, each flicker of synapse dissolves as quickly as it appears. surprisingly, the naturalistic imagery not only gives body to the abstract nature of the wired but brings a natural dimension to the cyber as much of it is rendered in urban analogue. each part of the text works like particles where one can just make out the genome and data within this space. the compression creates a strong affect that immerses one into the wired through its essence.

PSYCHOGRAMMA - The current consensus on cyberpunk is that 1) we're living it and 2) it's dead, as a genre. It's been for a while - arguably since the dozens of other "punk"s rose up to replace it - but became particularly apparent with the release of *Cyberpunk 2077*, a glossy mirrorshades-and-neon self-parody which provoked every commentator on the internet to give their own interpretation of what had gone wrong, whether the genre had lost its anticapitalist edge or was broken and Orientalist to begin with. Contrary to cyberpunk pioneer William Gibson's hopes, realistic fiction hasn't lived up to the promise of our wired present either, leaving us with little representation after the 80s of some of the most "contemporary"



aspects of our lives. There have been signs of a resurgence - I would argue that Cruelty Squad is a cyberpunk text, in the tradition of weird military-cyberpunk games like Killer7 - but few dare hew as close to the surface signifiers of the genre while still claiming - and managing - to do something original as caraparcél's PSYCHOGRAMMA.

PSYCHOGRAMMA routes much of its cyberpunk influence through the transformations that surface has undergone in non-narrative media, through aesthetics like vaporwave and dreampunk, which break from the dialectic of narrative as critical vs. entertaining to distill post-digital urban existence as stimmung, a Romantic attitude to the "second nature" that seems increasingly beyond human control or understanding, yet at the same time subconsciously, magically connected to us. Of all the cyberpunk tropes it places the most emphasis on the aspect of digital as dream-life, as distorted psychological projection, with which we have become increasingly (un)familiar as the surreal and inexplicable inner logics of social media memes, ideologies and relationships that eludes cyberpunk's pretensions to noir realism. That noir realism is still present in PSYCHOGRAMMA, both in self-consciously nostalgic, quasi-parodic form in the persona of Foxtel - one among many digital personas bor-

rowed from media genres (the operator Viper, the otaku Kunikida, the idol Tohka), cohabiting a genre-less post-modern “metaverse” - and in the more grounded form of the underworld he inhabits, a rhizome-map of secretive networks of power (Triads, mercenaries, conspiracies) that constitute the only possible distribution of violence across a digital dreamworld. But where stylistically, noir tends towards a stripped-down, sharp-edged and clear - if chiaroscuro - prose, PSYCHOGRAMMA spreads out in a borderless landscape of lush imagery, lighting, colour, contour and abstraction. Sentences coil around each other like half-encoded “dream-thoughts” through cyberspace, inner space and reality. Rather than the stimulant speed of Landian meltdown, PSYCHOGRAMMA slows down to process information overload, even in a gunfight choreographed with the graceful mechanism of Hong Kong film, to the time-dilating polyrhythm of DXM or the leaned-out trap that constitutes another stream of contemporary cyberpunk imaginary.

With the same fluidity with which its virtual and physical world slide together, PSYCHOGRAMMA shifts between the hard-and-fast techno-military logistics of the cyberpunk thriller which has traditionally dominated the genre and the more introspective, phenomenological sub-stream



exemplified in works like Serial Experiments Lain - a synthesis badly needed to address an era in which geopolitical conflict is driven by memetic subcultures and vice versa, let alone imagine its future. The structure of Fox-tel's rational, violent, and yet romantic investigations into digital legends, mysteries and alternate realities is both a psychological and objective relation to a world in which mind and body both melt into their mediations.

IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN!-NEET media from Welcome to the NHK to Oyasumi Punpun confront the growing isolation individuals feel and its effects in both physical and psychological ways. Despite this, part of what makes them powerful is their nature that much like life sometimes can be as humourous as it is serious. IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! understands this with a title straight out of a light novel and a character whose interior is very detailed with the psychological landscape of a NEET from mediated understandings of social interaction, social blunder and complex psychosis that debilitates them to a stand-still. Despite the serious psychological conflict faced, its narration is accessible, intrusive thoughts and sudden ideas cut naturally into the pace while retaining levity particularly when Luskonnig makes his brief visitation upon the real



world.

The shut-in has become common in online text art circles as online culture and hikikomori go hand in hand but like the NEET media that understands it as part of greater systemic and social problems, IT'S A GOOD THING THE DARK LORD IS A SHUT-IN! also understands that the shut-in and the riajuu (normal people) are very similar. Much fascinating is the relationship between the Dark Lord and Ymanñ's whose powers and life is spent keeping the former's powers at bay in a somewhat ascetic lifestyle. Ymanñ's convictions and detachments mirror Lukonnig's internal terrors and mediated relation to experience. Both the hikikomori and the people who keep society running have particular psychic maladies in withdrawal and hyperactivity which cross between each other as both conjure chaotic states of being.

DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY - "Can it be solarpunk if it's set in space" is a question the Friends At The Table's Twilight Mirage has already posed about the budding genre but Amara Reyes' Down By The River To Pray equips us better to answer. DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY fulfills solarpunk's vision of a utopia both rational and re-enchanted, but such that its otherworldly setting is a



key part of its answer; it dares to imagine ecology without Gaia. Gaia, or Heath, has of course not been simply abandoned or expended as resources for expansion, as in the space fantasies of our current ruling class. The redemptive history of Heath - subject of forthcoming projects in the “Heath cycle” - is a precondition for its thriving interplanetary polity - a model first of post-natural stability, so that on Savannah it can model a return of “wildness” as newly troubling freedom.

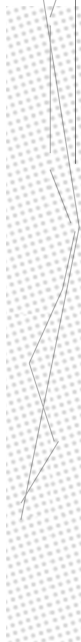
DOWN BY THE RIVER TO PRAY presents its findings in a deceptively down-to-Earth form - the bulk of the report is structured around dialogue, in a mode reminiscent of classic sci-fi such as the Foundation series and Dune. This dialogic emphasis, while bordering at times on the theatrical, reconnects to a deeper heritage of the novel: the “polyphony” Bakhtin identifies in the great realists. Such a polyphony - drawing on not only the voices of the individual characters but the “languages” of different classes and cultures, registers of social discourse, and impersonal tropes observed in the real social world - is particularly difficult to achieve in a speculative novel, which filters the multiplicity of the present through a speculative transformation situated in one author’s imagination and almost inevitably privileging certain elements. But it is indispens-

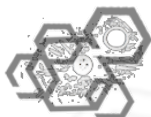


able to the function of speculative fiction as Amara Reyes imagines it - in which ecology itself can only be understood as intersubjectivity, and in which the “future” does not derive from a present but represents a moment in a divine river of history complete unto itself.

It is only by the most rigorous polyphony - a polyphony facilitated by graceful protocols of communication, the mannered transparency of its priest-lawyer-narrator - that DOWN BY THE RIVER is able to embrace solarpunk pluralism without resorting to the trope of localism, the liberal counter-utopianism of “small solutions”. Yet it also resists the conflation of solarpunk tendencies with a retrofuturist utopianism or generic ecomodernism by a thorough immersion in the aesthetics on which solarpunk was founded. The re-enchanted life-as-form of art-nouveau, here reflected as much in the form of the prose as the richly implied material settings, becomes an expression of the spiritual principle animating the project of life freed from necessity but not from interdependence.

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>>GALES SHORN TWIGS INTO DYING GRASS  
BREATHS THAT CARVE UP FIELDS  
EARTH RIPPED FROM ITS SURFACE,  
ROOTS ALIEN TO THE SMOKY AIR  
LITTLE STARLIGHT IMAGINES WORLD  
UNREAL TREES BLEED ONTO LAKES  
HEAVENLY SURFACE BEGINS TO RIPPLE

*SEE YOU  
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